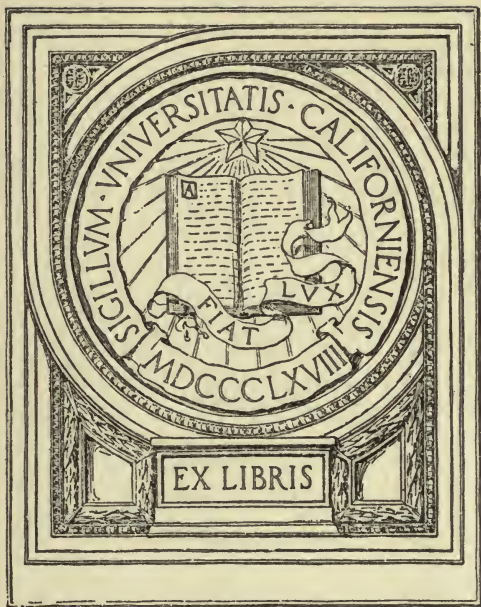


THE CONFESSIONS
OF A
WELL-MEANING WOMAN

STEPHEN McKENNA





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**THE CONFESSIONS OF A
WELL-MEANING WOMAN**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE SENSATIONALISTS

Part III: The Secret Victory

THE SENSATIONALISTS

Part II: The Education of Eric Lane

THE SENSATIONALISTS

Part I: Lady Lilith

SONIA MARRIED

MIDAS AND SON

NINETY-SIX HOURS' LEAVE

SONIA

THE SIXTH SENSE

SHEILA INTERVENES

THE RELUCTANT LOVER

* * *

WHILE I REMEMBER

The Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

By

STEPHEN McKENNA



CASELL AND COMPANY, LTD
London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne

TO THE
AMERICAN

First published 1922.

To
LORD AND LADY BEAUCHAMP

In Gratitude for their Hospitality
at Walmer Castle, where this book was begun,
and at Madresfield Court, where it was finished.

516848

Cusins : Do you call poverty a crime ?

Undershaft : The worst of crimes . . . Poverty . . . strikes dead the very souls of all who come within sight, sound or smell of it. . . .

BERNARD SHAW : *Major Barbara*.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
1. LADY ANN SPENWORTH PREFERS NOT TO DISCUSS HER OPERATION	1
2. SHE REPUDIATES ALL RESPONSIBILITY	26
3. SHE TOUCHES RELUCTANTLY ON DIVORCE	51
4. SHE IS CONTENT WITH A LITTLE MUSIC	77
5. SHE REFUSES TO BECOME A MATCH-MAKER	103
6. SHE HOLDS THE <i>CORPS DIPLOMATIQUE</i> TO ITS DUTY.	128
7. SHE DEPLORES PROPOSALS BY WOMEN	153
8. SHE REFERS TO HER DIARY	178
9. SHE NARRATES AN EMBARRASSMENT AVERTED	202
10. SHE IS A PRISONER IN HER OWN HOUSE	228
11. SHE FINDS HER HEART WARMING	253
12. SHE DEFENDS HER CONSISTENCY	277

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THE CONFESSIONS OF A WELL-MEANING WOMAN

I

LADY ANN SPENWORTH PREFERS NOT TO DISCUSS
HER OPERATION

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion):
You have toiled all the way here again? Do you know, I feel I am only *beginning* to find out who are the *true* friends? I am much, much better. . . On Friday I am to be allowed on to the sofa and by the end of next week Dr. Richardson promises to let me go back to Mount Street. Of course I should have *liked* the operation to take place there—it is one's frame and setting, but, truly honestly, Arthur and I have not been in a position to have any painting or papering done for so long . . . The surgeon insisted on a nursing-home. Apparatus and so on and so forth. . . Quite between ourselves, I fancy that they make a very good thing out of these homes; but I am so thankful to be well again that I would put up with almost any imposition. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Everything went off too wonderfully. Perhaps you have seen my brother Brackenbury? Or Ruth? Ah, I am sorry; I should have been vastly entertained to hear what they were saying, what they *dared* say. Ruth did indeed offer to pay the expenses of the operation—the belated prick of conscience!—; and it was on the tip of my tongue to say we are not *yet* dependent on her spasmodic charity. Also, that I can keep my lips closed about Brackenbury without expecting a—tip! But they know I can't *afford* to refuse £500. . . If they, if everybody would only leave one *alone!* Spied on, whispered about. . .

The papers made such an absurd stir! If you are known by name as occupying any little *niche*, the world waits gaping below. I suppose I ought to be flattered, but for *days* there were callers, letters, telephone-messages. Like *Royalty in extremis*. . . And I never *pretended* that the operation was in any sense critical. . .

Do you know, beyond saying that, I would much rather *not* talk about it? This very modern frankness. . . Not *you*, of course! But, when a man like my brother-in-law Spensworth strides in here a few hours before the anæsthetic is administered and says "What is the matter with you? Much ado about nothing, I call it. . ." That from Arthur's brother

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

to Arthur's wife, when, for all he knew, he might never see her alive again. . . I prefer just to say that everything went off *most* satisfactorily and that I hope now to be better than I have been for years. . .

It was anxiety more than anything else. A prolonged strain always finds out the weak place: Arthur complaining that he had lost some of his directorships and that, with the war, he was being offered none to take their place; talk of selling the house in Mount Street, every *corner* filled with a wonderful memory of old happy days when the princess almost *lived* with me; sometimes no news from the front for weeks, and that *could* only mean that my boy Will was moving up with the staff. It was just when I was at my wits' end that he wrote to say that he must have five hundred pounds. He gave no reason, so I assumed that one of his friends must be in trouble; and I was not to tell Arthur. . . This last effort really exhausted me; and I knew that, if I was not to be a useless encumbrance to everybody, I must "go into dock," as Will would say, "for overhauling and repairs." Dr. Richardson really seemed reluctant to impose any further tax on my vitality at such a time, but I assured him that I was not afraid of the knife. So here you find me!

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

A little home-sick for Mount Street and my friends? Indeed, yes; though I have not been neglected. Are not those tulips *too* magnificent? *Were*, rather. . . The dear princess brought them a week ago, and I was so touched by her sweetness that I have not the heart to throw them away. If *she*, to whom I can be nothing but a dull old woman. . . I mean, it brings into relief the unkindness of others; and I do indeed find it hard to forgive the callousness of Spenworth and my brother Brackenbury. No, *that*—like the operation—I would rather *not* talk about. Their attitude was so—wicked. . .

You, of course, have been under an anæsthetic. I? Not since I was a child; and the only sensation I recall was a hammer, hammer, hammer just as I went off, which I believe is nothing but the beating of one's heart. . . But *before* the operation. . . You must not think that I am posing as a heroine; but accidents *do* happen, and for two days and two nights, entirely by myself. . . It was inevitable that one should take stock. . . My thoughts went back to old days at Brackenbury, *spacious* old days with my dear father when he was ambassador at Rome and Vienna (they were happy times, though the expense crippled him); old days when my brother was a funny,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

impetuous little boy—not *hard*, as he has since become. . . I am fourteen years his senior; and, from the time when our dear mother died to the time when I married Arthur, I was wife and mother and sister at the Hall. On me devolved what, in spite of the socialists, I venture to call the great tradition of English life. . .

Lying in bed here, one could not help saying “*If anything goes amiss, am I leaving the world better than I found it?*” Under my own vine and fig-tree I had been a good wife to Arthur and a good mother to Will; and, if there had not always been *some* one of good intentions to smoothe over difficulties with the family on *both* sides. . . Blessed are the peace-makers, though I have sometimes wondered whether I did right in even tolerating my brother-in-law Spenworth. It is probably no news to you that he very much wanted to marry me, but I always felt that even Cheniston, even the house in Grosvenor Square, even his immense income would not compensate me for a husband whom I could never trust out of my sight. Arthur may be only the younger brother, I very soon found that the old spacious days were over; but with him one *does* know where one is, and I have never grudged poor Kathleen Manorby my leavings. There indeed is a lesson

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

for the worldly! She was in love with a poor decent young subaltern named Laughton, more suitable for her in every way; however, the lure of Cheniston and the opportunity of being Lady Spenworth! . . . *He* transferred to an Indian regiment; and, if his heart was broken, so much the worse for him. I am not superstitious; but, when I remember that bit of treachery, when I think of Spenworth, unfaithful from the beginning, when I see those four dairy-maid daughters and no heir. . . Might not some people call that a judgement? It makes no *personal* difference, for the ungodly will flourish throughout *our* time; and, though my boy Will must ultimately succeed, he can look for nothing from his uncle in the meantime. I have lost the thread. . .

Ah, yes! I have done my humble best to comfort poor Kathleen and to give her *some* idea how to bring up her girls if she does not want to see them going the same way as their unhappy father. One is not thanked for that sort of thing; Spenworth, who blusters but can never look me in the eyes, pretends that he has refused to have me inside Cheniston since I publicly rebuked him, though he well knows that I will not enter the house while the present licence prevails. But one would have thought that even he would have had serious moments,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

would have felt that his soul might be required of him at any hour. . . . A sense of gratitude, if not verbal thanks, was what I expected. . . .

Hoped for, rather than expected. . . . You are quite right.

And I have tried to keep the peace on the other side, at Brackenbury. There, I am thankful to say, there is the *appearance* of harmony; but, goodness me, there is an appearance of harmony when you see pigs eating amicably out of the same trough. . . . No, I ought not to have said that! And I would not say it to any one else; but, when I remember the *distinction* of the Hall in the old, spacious days. . . . My poor sister-in-law Ruth—well, she knew no better; and Brackenbury, instead of absorbing her, has allowed her to absorb him. They seem to have *no* sense of their position; and in the upbringing of their children they either don't *know* or they don't *care*. When this war broke out, Culroyd ran away from Eton and *enlisted*. He is in the Coldstream now, and I expect the whole thing is forgotten, but Brackenbury had the utmost difficulty in getting him out. And my niece Phyllida instantly set herself to learn nursing—which, of course, in itself is altogether praiseworthy—, but she makes it an excuse for now living entirely unchecked and uncontrolled in London—the

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“bachelor-girl,” I believe, is the phrase. I did indeed *force* my brother to make her come to Mount Street; but, if that preserves the *convenances*, it is the utmost that I have achieved. *When* the trouble breaks out, *when* we find her *liée* with some hopelessly unsuitable “temporary gentleman” . . . I? In a rash moment I allowed Brackenbury to make some trifling contribution to the cost of the girl’s bed and board: the result is that she treats me as a lodging-house-keeper. . .

It was not a cheerful retrospect; but I had done my best, I could only say “Let me be judged on my intentions.” The future. . . That was what troubled me more. When Will resigns his commission, something must be done to establish him in life until he succeeds his uncle. He is nearly thirty and has never earned a penny beyond his present army pay; I cannot support him indefinitely; and these frantic appeals for a hundred pounds here and five hundred pounds there. . . I cannot meet them, unless I am to sell the house in Mount Street and give up any little *niche* that I may occupy. Frankly, I am not prepared to do that. One’s frame and setting. . . If his uncles would make a proper settlement, there would be an end of all our troubles; failing that, I must find him a well-paid appointment. . . And,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

in another sense, I want to see him established. Exactly! That is just what I *do* mean. Thanks to the energy of a few pushful but not particularly well-connected people like my Lady Maitland, social distinctions have ceased to exist in London. I will be as democratic as you please: I swallowed the Americans, I swallowed the South Africans, I swallow the *rastaquouères* daily; I don't mind sitting between a stock-broker and an actor, but it is a different thing altogether when you come to marriage. My boy has to be protected from the ordinary dangers and temptations; and, though I would do nothing to influence him, it would be highly satisfactory if he met some nice girl with a little money of her own. Naturally one would like to see the choice falling on some one in his own immediate world; but times are changing, and it would be regarded as old-fashioned prejudice if one made too strong a stand against the people who really are the only people *with* money; or against a foreigner. . . . But this is all rather like crossing the bridge before one comes to the stream. . . .

Lying here, *very* much depressed, I wanted to make provision for the *immediate* future. Now, would *you* say I had taken leave of my senses if I suggested that I had some claim on Brackenbury and Spenworth? Does relation-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

ship count for nothing? Or gratitude? You shall hear! You remember that, when you left just before my operation, Brackenbury came in to see me. I had sent for him. I am not a nervous woman; but accidents *do* happen, and I wanted a last word with them all in *case*. . . just in *case*. . . Arthur never takes a thought for the future, and I told Brackenbury that, if anything *did* happen, he would be the *real* as well as the titular head of the family.

“It is not for me,” I said, “to advise or interfere with you or Ruth or your children. If—as I pray—Culroyd comes through unscathed, he has all the world before him, and you have only to see that he does not marry below his station. With Phyllida you must be more careful. She is young, attractive, well-dowered and a little, just a *little* headstrong. The war has made our girls quite absurdly romantic; any one in uniform, especially if he has been wounded. . . And you, who are rich, perhaps hardly realize as well as do we, who are poor, the tricks and *crimes* that a man will commit to marry a fortune. I do not suggest that Phyllida should be withdrawn from her hospital—”

“Oh, she’s signed on for the duration of the war,” Brackenbury interrupted.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“But I *do* think,” I resumed, “that you should keep an eye on her. . .”

Perhaps there was never anything in it; but *one* young man whom Phyllida brought to Mount Street, a Colonel Butler, one of her own patients. . . Oh, quite a presentable, manly young fellow, but *hopelessly* unsuitable for *Phyllida!* My boy Will first put me on my guard when he was last home on leave; not that *he* had any personal interest, for all her four thousand a year or whatever it is, but they *have* always been brought up like brother and sister. . . My last act before coming here was to make Colonel Butler promise not to see or communicate with Phyllida until he had spoken frankly to Brackenbury. I understand that he has been invited to the Hall “on approval”, as Will would say; and then we shall see what we shall see. I fancy he will have the good sense to recognize that such an alliance would be out of the question: every one would say that he had married her for her money, and no man of any pride would tolerate that. . . Phyllida, robbed of her stolen joys, was of course furious with me for what she was courteous enough to call my “interference.” . .

“Her head is screwed on ‘quite tight,’” said Brackenbury, “though I have no idea what you’re insinuating.”

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“I am insinuating nothing,” I said, “but do you want to see your only daughter married for her money by some penniless soldier—?”

“If she’s in love with him, I don’t care who she marries,” said Brackenbury with a quite extraordinary callousness. “He must be a decent fellow, of course, who’ll make her happy. I don’t attach the importance to Debrett that you do, Ann, especially since the war.”

As *he* had said it! I was *mute*. . . Every one is aware that poor Ruth was *nobody*—the rich daughter of a Hull shipping-magnate. I made him marry her because he *had* to marry *some* one with a little money—and much good it has been to anybody!,—but I hardly expected to hear him *boasting* or encouraging his *children* to pretend that there are no distinctions. . .

“Well, it’s not my business, dear Brackenbury,” I said. I was feeling too *ill* to wrangle. . . “When I asked you to come here, it was because—accidents *do* happen—I wanted to see you again, perhaps for the last time—”

“But aren’t you frightening yourself unduly?,” interrupted Brackenbury. “Arthur told me it was only—”

“Arthur knows nothing about it,” I said. It is always so pleasant, when you are facing the possibility of death, to be told that it is all

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

nothing. . . "I wanted to see you," I said, "about Will. You and I have to pull together for the sake of the family. If anything happens to me, I leave Will in your charge. His father will, of course, do what he can, but poor Arthur has nothing but his directorships; you must be our rock and anchor."

And then I plucked up courage to ask whether Brackenbury could not do something *permanent* for our boy. Even a thousand a year. . . It is not as though he couldn't afford it if Ruth shewed a little good-will, not as though either had done so extravagantly much for their own nephew. Brackenbury did indeed undertake to pay for him at Eton; but, as Will left before any of us expected, they were let off lightly. . .

Brackenbury would only talk of increasing expenses and the burden of taxation.

"I could face my operation with an easier mind," I said, "if I knew that Will would never want."

"Well, some one has always pulled him out hitherto," said Brackenbury. "I suppose some one always will." I had to *rack* my brains, but honestly truly the only occasion I could remember on which he had come to our assistance was when Will as a mere boy fell in with some men no better than common swindlers who

prevailed on him to play cards for stakes which he could not afford. . . . "He won't want," Brackenbury went on with the insolence of a man who has never done a hand's turn in his life, "if he'll only buckle down to it and work. Or he could spend less money."

This, I knew, was a "dig" at me. Before my boy had time to learn how very little distance his army pay would take him, I *had* asked my brother to tide him over a passing difficulty. Would you not have thought that any uncle would have welcomed the opportunity? I said nothing. And then Brackenbury had the assurance to criticize *my* way of life and to ask why I kept on the house in Mount Street if it always meant "pulling the devil by the tail," as he so elegantly expressed it. Why did I not take a less expensive house? And so on and so forth. I suppose he imagined that I could ask the princess to come to Bayswater. . . .

"Do not," I said, "let us discuss the matter any more. It is unpleasant to be a pauper, but more unpleasant to be a beggar. If my boy wins through with his life—"

"Oh, you needn't worry about that," said Brackenbury. "They tell me he's on a staff which has never even heard a shot fired."

They tell me. . . . Does not that phrase always put you on your guard, as it were? Of

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

course he was quoting Culroyd, who is still young enough to imagine that whatever he does must be right and that every one must do as he does. Ever since Will was appointed to the staff . . . I should have thought it stood to reason ; you keep the *brains* of the army to direct the war, and the *other* people. . . I won't put it even as strongly as that, but there *must* be a division of labour. My Lord Culroyd seems to think that any one who has *not* run away from school and enlisted. . . Sometimes I have been hard put to it to keep the peace when they have been on leave at the same time. But I could not allow Brackenbury to make himself a ruler and a judge. . .

“ Is it not enough,” I said, “ that you have refused the last request I may ever make? Is it necessary to add slander to ungraciousness?”

“ Oh, keep cool, Ann, keep cool,” said Brackenbury with his usual elegance. “ From all accounts you ain't going to die yet awhile ; and, if you do, Master Will won't be any worse off in pocket. He can earn his living as well as another. I'll promise you this, though ; if he gets smashed up in the war, I'll see that he don't starve, but that's the limit of my responsibility. Now, does *that* set your mind at rest?”

I refused to continue the discussion and sank back on my pillows.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“What,” I said, “what have I done to deserve this?” . . .

And it was I who found Ruth for him. . .

Do you know, after that, it was on the tip of my tongue to say I could not see Spenworth? He had made such a pother about coming up from Cheniston. . . If *your* brother-in-law were faced with an operation and begged to have what would perhaps be his last word with you . . . and if, through no fault of yours, there had been unhappy differences in the past. . . The nurse came in to say that he had arrived, and I felt that I must make an effort, whatever it cost me. He was worse than Brackenbury! What they said to each other outside I do not profess to know; but Spenworth came in, bawling in that hunting-field voice of his. . . Ah, of course, you do not know him! I assure you, it goes through and through one's head. . . I begged him to spare me; and, when I had quieted him, I referred very briefly to our estrangement, which, I told him, was occasioned solely by my efforts to do what in me lay to promote peace in the family. Poor Kathleen . . . betrayed and neglected; the licentiousness of life at Cheniston—eating, drinking, smoking, gambling, racing; those four *unhappy* girls. . . A *pagan* household. . .

“But,” I said, “I do not want to disinter

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

old controversies. If I have failed in achievement, you must judge me on my intentions. Lying here, though I am not a nervous woman, I have been compelled to think of the uncertainty of life. Let us, Spenworth," I said, "bury the hatchet. If anything happens to me, you must be our rock and anchor. You are the head of the family; Arthur is your brother; Will is your nephew—"

"No fault of mine," growled Spenworth in a way that set everything trembling. He is obsessed by the idea that rudeness is the same thing as humour. "What's he been up to now?"

"He has been 'up to' nothing, as you call it," I said. "But I should face my operation with an easier mind if I knew that Will's future was assured. *When* the war is over and *if* he is spared, it is *essential* that he should have independent means of *some* kind. It is pitiable that a man in his position. . . Do you not feel it—your own nephew? With the present prices, a thousand a year is little enough; but Arthur can do nothing to *increase* his directorships; and if my poor guidance and support are withdrawn—"

"What is supposed to be the matter with you?," Spenworth interrupted.

"I can hardly discuss that with *you*," I said.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“Well, Brackenbury told me—and Arthur told Brackenbury—,” he began.

“Arthur and Brackenbury know nothing about it,” I said. “For some time I have not been well, and it seemed worth the unavoidable risk of an operation if I might hope for greater strength and comfort. But I could not go under the anæsthetic with an easy mind if I felt that I had in any way omitted to put my house in order. Between us,” I said, “bygones will be bygones. Will you not give me the satisfaction of knowing that, if we do not meet again, I am safe in leaving Arthur and my boy to your care? You *are* the head of the family. Can my boy’s future not be *permanently* assured—here and now?”

I was not bargaining or haggling; it was a direct appeal to his generosity. . . . Spensworth hummed and hawed for a while; then he said:

“I don’t feel very much disposed to do anything more for that young man.”

“*More?*,” I echoed.

“Well, I paid up once,” he said. “Arthur never told you, I suppose? Well, it was hardly a woman’s province. I was acting *then* as head of the family . . . about the time when you thought fit to criticize me very frankly. . . .”

I had no more idea what he was talking about than the man in the moon!

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“Spenworth! I must beg for enlightenment,” I said.

“Oh, we’ll let bygones be bygones,” he answered. “The case was never brought to trial. But, as long as I’m likely to be called on to wipe up little messes of that kind, I’d sooner make a sinking-fund, to provide against emergencies, than pay Will money to get into more mischief and then have to stump up again.”

More explicit than that he declined to be. . . .

“Then,” I said, “you repudiate all responsibility to your own flesh and blood? Whether I live or die, this is a request I shall never repeat.”

“Oh, we’ll see how things go,” he answered. “You may not be as bad as you think. If I find Will starving at the end of the war, I’d undertake to pay his passage to Australia and give him a hundred a year to stay there. . . .”

Until you know my brother-in-law, you cannot appreciate the *refinement* of his humour. . . .

“Let us,” I said, “discuss this no further.”

You have probably observed that a man is never content with being *thoroughly* ungenerous; he must always try to justify himself.

“You know,” he began, very importantly, “you wouldn’t have half so much trouble with

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

that fellow, if you'd licked him a bit more when he was younger. . . .”

This from *Spenworth!*

“Who,” I asked, “who made *thee* a ruler and a judge?”

And then, truly honestly, I had to beg him to leave me in order that I might compose myself. . . .

Compose myself!

To shew you how unnerved I had become, I wrote down something which I had never *breathed* to Arthur or Will. We have always been so poor that I had dreaded an emergency, a sudden illness, for which I should be unable to provide. In Mount Street we are positive *Spartans!* Well, from the day of Will's birth I have pinched and scraped, scraped and pinched, *trying* to put something by. . . . A little nest-egg. . . . Thirty years—nearly. I have never dared invest it, in case *something* happened. It lies at the bank—in a separate account—ready at a moment's notice. When I was so ill four years ago, did I touch it? But before my operation—in case anything happened—I told Will the *amount* and how I had arranged for him to be able to draw on it. What I tell *you* is told to the grave; I have torn up the letter; they *still* do not know; but, when I *saw* the amount, I was truly

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

tempted to say "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" . . . I have lost the thread. . . .

Ah, yes! I was saying that my nerve had entirely gone. . . I was so much exhausted that I fell into some kind of trance. Goodness knows the thousand and one things that go to make up a dream. . . Opposites. . . All that sort of thing. . . I dreamt most wonderfully about Will and—I wonder if you can guess? Phyllida! They have been brought *up* together—cousins! She is young, high-spirited, very, *very* attractive; and, thanks to Brackenbury's marriage, she is well-dowered. . . I said to myself in the dream "If she could marry happily some one in her own station. . . ." And then I seemed to see her with Will. . . It was but a phantasy. I should do nothing to encourage it, I am not at all sure that I even approve. . .

Alas for reality! Phyllida came and bullied me for my "interference." . . But I told you about that. And, the day before the operation, Arthur asked whether I really thought it was necessary. Like that! At the eleventh hour!

"I don't trust these surgeons," he said. "They *make* operations."

At first I was *touched*. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“Dear Arthur,” I said, “I am not doing this for my amusement.”

“Oh, of course not!,” he answered. “All the same, I wish it could be avoided. And, if it can’t be avoided, I wish you’d kept more quiet about it. I don’t know what you said to Spenworth and Brackenbury, but they’re making the deuce’s own tale of it.”

I begged him to enlighten me.

“Well,” said Arthur, “Spenworth says that you pretended to be at death’s door in order to force him to make a settlement on Will and that he might have consented if he hadn’t happened to know that you’d said the same thing to Brackenbury five minutes before. About being the head of the family and all that sort of thing. You know, Ann, it *does* make us look just a little bit ridiculous.”

You assure me you have seen neither Brackenbury nor Ruth? I just wondered who was privileged to hear this “deuce’s own tale” . . . I can hardly ask you to believe it; but I do assure you that this is the solemn truth; those two men were seeking to convince themselves that I was *pretending* to be ill in order to work on their susceptible emotions! They seem to have had the good taste to keep their little joke for home consumption, but you may be sure they made merry with Ruth and Kath-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

leen about me. . . Too merry, perhaps; I can only think it was conscience that made Ruth offer to pay for the operation. Or perhaps it was curiosity. . . I wonder what their feelings would have been if anything *had* gone amiss. . .

No, I am thankful to say there was no hitch of any kind. The anæsthetic was administered, I heard that hammer, hammer, hammer—and then voices *very* far away. It was all over! That was the preliminary examination. Then I was subjected to that too wonderful X-ray light and saw myself as a black skeleton with a misty-grey covering of flesh, one's wedding-ring standing out like a black bar round one's finger. Too marvellous. I do *believe* in this science. . .

But not so marvellous as what followed. Dr. Richardson congratulated me, and I had to beg for enlightenment.

“It will not be necessary,” he said, “to operate after all. The symptoms are exactly as you described them, but a little treatment, principally massage. . .”

And that is why I am still here, though I hope to be allowed up on Friday. But lying in bed makes one so absurdly weak! What I have told you is for your ears alone. It would be altogether too much of a triumph for Spenworth. Instead of feeling any thankfulness that I had

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

been spared the knife, he would only say. . . Well, you can imagine it even from the very imperfect sketch that I have given you. No, I am assured that massage makes the operation wholly unnecessary; and I am already feeling much, much better. If I have not taken the whole world into my confidence, it is partly because I detest this modern practice of discussing one's inside ("wearing one's stomach on one's sleeve," as Will rather naughtily describes it) and partly because I am altogether too humble-minded to fancy that the entire world is interested in my private affairs. When the princess asked "How did the operation go off?," I said "Excellently, thank you, ma'am." And that was what all the papers published. It was not worth while telling her that the operation was found to be unnecessary. I am not of those who feel obliged to trumpet forth that Mrs. Tom Noddy has left Gloucester Place for Eastbourne or Eastbourne for Gloucester Place. As Tennyson says, "Again—who wonders and who cares?"

At the same time—I loathe Americanisms and I do conscientiously try to express myself in what I may call the English of educated society; we do not seem to have any literary equivalent for "mentality," so I must ask you to pardon the neologism—will you, to *oblige*

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

me, try to imagine the "mentality" of Spensworth and Brackenbury? The sister-in-law of one, the sister of the other; *casting* about in her resourceful mind to discover any means of softening their hard hearts; clapping hand to forehead; exclaiming "I have it!"; retiring to bed; summoning the relations; making frantic appeal; exacting death-bed promises. . .

Truly honestly, I don't think we have come to that yet. . .

And those two men have an hereditary right. . . Thank goodness, neither of them knows where the House of Lords *is!* There are moments when I feel *very* nearly a radical. . .

But you agree that they are hardly the people I should wish to discuss my operation with. And whatever I have said to you has of course been said in confidence.

II

LADY ANN SPENWORTH REPUDIATES ALL RESPONSIBILITY

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion): But this is as delightful as it is unexpected! If we only have the carriage to ourselves. . . I often say that a first-class ticket is the merest snare and delusion; during the war it has exposed one to a new order—I've no doubt they are very *brave* and so forth and so on, but that sort of thing ought to be kept for the trenches. One doesn't want to travel with it, one certainly doesn't want to live with it. . .

At least *I* don't. There's no accounting for tastes, as my poor niece Phyllida has been shewing. You are going to Brackenbury, of course? Every one *does* by this train. In the old days my father enjoyed the privilege of being able to stop every train that ran through Brackenbury station; he held property on both sides of the line and was a director for very many years. One said a word to the guard—they were a very civil lot of men—, and that was literally all. My brother has allowed that

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

to lapse, like everything else; and you now have to come by the four-twenty or not at all.

I should have thought the Brackenbury parties were difficult enough without giving everybody a gratuitous two hours in the train to grow tired of everybody else. My sister-in-law Ruth has other qualities, no doubt, but she will not go down to history as one of the great English hostesses. . . It's not surprising, perhaps; but, if you're not born to that sort of thing, wouldn't you make an effort to *acquire* it? There must be brains of *some* kind in the family, or the father could never have made all that money. I always felt a certain responsibility about Ruth; Brackenbury *had* to marry some one with a *little* money, and, knowing the *sort* of girl he'd fancy if I gave him half a chance. . . I was fourteen years older and knew something of poor Brackenbury's limitations; when I met Ruth Philpot and found that the money *did* come from quite a respectable shipping firm in Hull, I said: "Marry her, my dear boy, before you have a chance of making a greater fool of yourself." And I told him I'd do what I could for her; little hints, you understand. . . I'm afraid poor Ruth was not a very apt pupil; and Brackenbury, who never had *any* sense of his position, was a mere broken

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

reed. "Assert yourself!" I used to say. "If you don't absorb *her*, *she'll* absorb you." That is the only occasion on which I have ever interfered in matters of the heart, either to guide or check; I look at Ruth Brackenbury and say to myself: "Ann Spenworth, you have your lesson ever before you." I would not urge or hinder now, even with my own son. Phyllida may try to fix responsibility on me, but I repudiate it—entirely. In the present instance I feel that it is, once again, the sins of the parents. . . . As I felt it my duty to tell them, there wouldn't have been a moment's trouble with Phyllida, if she had been brought up differently. . . .

I? Goodness me, no! Many, many things will have to be unsaid before Brackenbury induces me to set foot in his house again. You know whether I am the woman to stand on my dignity, but, when one's niece writes one letters in the third person. . . . Indeed I know what I am talking about! "*Lady Phyllida Lyster presents her compliments to Lady Ann Spenworth and is not interested in any explanation that Lady Ann may think fit to put forward.*" These are the manners of the war. From the very first I urged Brackenbury not to let her work in that hospital; *some* one had to go, of course; I'm not so foolish as to think that a hospital would run itself without hands, but

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

why Phyllida? And, goodness me, if they couldn't stop her, they might have made a few enquiries, exercised *some* little control. . . Christine Malleson is very energetic and capable, no doubt, but you would hardly look for standards or traditions in *her*; however, she and my Lady Maitland and the rest seem able to carry people off their feet by sheer violence. Now Ruth and Brackenbury are paying for it. And, of course, poor Aunt Ann is to blame for everything. For the present I think it's best to leave them severely alone. One tries to do what seems to be one's duty; one puts up with a great many rebuffs; but in the end people must be left, in the homely old phrase, to stew in their own juice. . .

I'm really not sure how much is supposed to be known. Phyllida will no doubt tell you her side, simply as a means of attacking me. She works herself into such a state! I told Brackenbury that he ought to send her away for a complete change. . . I'm sick and tired of the whole thing; I'm *sure* it contributed to my illness; but, if it is going to be discussed, you'd better hear the truth. The whole time she was working at the hospital, Phyllida did me the honour to make my house her own; and, if I questioned my own wisdom, it was because of Will. He would be home on leave from time

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

to time; and, perhaps on account of a curious dream which I had about them at the time of my operation, I was not at all sure that I wanted to see the intimacy increasing; when he marries, it will have to be some one with a *little* money, but I do not want to lose him yet and I cannot feel that Phyllida is very suitable. . . . You can imagine, therefore, whether I should be likely to scheme or contrive to throw them into each other's arms; to *intrigue* to get rivals out of the way. . . . I have lost the thread.

Ah, yes! Phyllida! Now, I chose my words carefully: "making my house her own," not "staying in my charge." When I went into the nursing-home, I *tackled* Brackenbury. . . .

"Please understand," I said, "that I accept no responsibility. The child goes to and from the hospital *when* she likes, *how* she likes. I know nothing of the people with whom she associates there; and, if you like the idea of her coming in at all hours from theatres and dances, I suppose it's all right. But I can't stop her," I said; "I feel it my duty to tell you I can't stop her."

Brackenbury made some foolish rejoinder about Phyllida's head being screwed on tight or her heart being in the right place. (In that family they *express* themselves so uncouthly.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Goodness me, one need not be a blue-stocking to realize that English *has* a certain dignity.) She was only doing what every other girl did, he said. . . I'm as democratic as any one, but I wondered what our *father* would have said to the doctrine that his daughter might do a thing simply because everybody else was doing it. . .

You know this Colonel Butler, perhaps? (It's only brevet-rank; if he stays on in the army, he reverts to full lieutenant only.) I'll confess at once that I liked him. When he was convalescent, Phyllida brought him to luncheon one day in Mount Street, and I thought him a decent, manly young fellow. I understand he comes from the west of England; and that, perhaps, accounts for the accent which I thought I detected; or, of course, he may simply have been not altogether at ease. (When I commented on it afterwards to Phyllida, she insisted that he was very badly shaken by his wound and the three operations. . . I think that was the first time I suspected anything; she championed him so very warmly.) I liked him—frankly. Some one quite early in the war said something about “temporary officers” and “temporary gentlemen”—it was very naughty, but so true!—; I said to my boy Will, when Colonel Butler was gone:

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“If they were all like *him*, the army might be proud of them.”

“All I’ve met *are* like him,” said Phyllida, “only of course not so much so.”

I was struggling to find a meaning—Phyllida expresses herself almost as carelessly as her poor mother, but with hardly her mother’s excuse—, when she began to pour out a catalogue of his virtues: he had won a Military Cross and a Distinguished Service Order with a bar, he was the youngest colonel in the army, I don’t know what else.

“Who are his people?,” I asked.

A name like Butler is so very misleading; it may be all right—or it may not.

“I *really* don’t know,” said Phyllida, “and, what’s more, I don’t care. . .”

She was prattling away, but I thought it time to make one or two enquiries. I remember saying to poor Ruth—I forget in what connection; life is one long succession of these needless, irritating little encounters—I remember saying that Phyllida was in the position of a girl with no mother. It’s not that Ruth and Brackenbury aren’t *fond* of her, but they take no trouble. . . I asked what our young paragon’s regiment was, and you’ll hardly believe me if I tell you that it was one I had never heard of. Will knew, of course, but then,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

on the staff, these things are brought to your notice. . .

“And what is he in civil life?,” I asked.

Phyllida didn't know. His father, I think she told me, was a surveyor, and she presumed that he intended to be a surveyor too. And an excellent profession, I should imagine, with the big estates being broken up and the properties changing hands everywhere. Brackenbury had an offer for the Hall—some wealthy contractor. . . I couldn't help smiling to think how our father would have dealt with him. Brackenbury let him off far too lightly, I thought, and tried to justify himself to me by saying that it was a very tempting offer. . . As if *they* needed money. . .

I had made up my mind at the outset to do nothing precipitate. The war has made girls quite dangerously romantic, and any opposition might have created—artificially—a most undesirable attachment. I knew that Phyllida had these young officers through her hands in dozens; and, though I was naturally anxious, I knew that in a few weeks or months our paragon would be back in Flanders or Devonshire—out of Christine Malleson's hospital, at all events. I commended my spirit, so to say. . .

He came to call—Colonel Butler did. I so

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

little expected him—or any one else, for that matter; the war *has* done that for us—that I'd given no orders, and he was shewn up. Norden—you remember him? They took him for the army, though I wrote a personal letter to the War Office. . . A man with varicose veins and three small children. . . Norden would have known better, but I'd no one but maids, who don't *know* and don't *care*. . . Colonel Butler was shewn up, still not quite at ease, and I made myself as gracious as possible. D'you know, I thought it quite dear of him? His mother had told him that he must always call at any house where he'd had a meal—even luncheon, apparently, in war-time; as Will said, when I told him, I'm glad there aren't many wild mothers like that, roaming at large. . . He sat and talked—quite intelligently; I want to give him his due—; I rang for tea. . . He hadn't learned the art of *going*. . . We got on famously until he began speaking of Phyllida; the first time it was “your niece,” then almost at once “Phyllida.” I said “*Lady Phyllida*”—I must have said it three times, but he was quite impervious. Then Phyllida came in and openly called him “Hilary.” . . They were dining together, it seemed, and going to a play. I try to conceal my palæolithic remains in dealing with Phyllida, but I *did* say “By

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

yourselves?" Oh, yes, the most natural thing in the world. . . I reminded her that Will was home on leave, but the hint was not taken. Off they went. . .

If I were not very fond of Phyllida, I shouldn't take so much trouble about her. . . And I always have to remember that Ruth is too busy painting and powdering ever to think of her own daughter. I suppose she feels that her looks are the only thing that keeps Brackenbury enslaved. . . What was I saying? Oh, about poor Phyllida. It is to *my* credit that I insisted on a proper settlement when Brackenbury was mooning about like a love-sick boy; she has four thousand when she's of age and she'll have another three when the parents die—enough, you will agree, to tempt some men. I happened to mention at dinner that this Colonel Butler had called, and Will became greatly concerned. It was quite disinterested, because I have always felt that, if he *ever* dropped the handkerchief, I could make a good guess who would pick it up. Will quite clearly thought, with me, that Colonel Butler was in earnest and that poor Phyllida was slipping into his toils. . .

An opportunity came to me two or three days before my operation. Phyllida—she was quite brazen about it—admitted that she had

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

dined with her hero four times in one week. That was on a Saturday; I'm glad to say that she hasn't become democratic enough to go to these picture-houses, and there was nothing to do on Sunday. I told her she might ask Colonel Butler to dine with us. And, when he came, I took occasion to speak rather freely to him.

"I can't help seeing," I said, "that you are very intimate with my niece."

"Oh, I'm devoted to Phyllida," he answered.

"Then," I said, "you'd cut your hand off before you did anything to make people talk about her."

And then I rehearsed these dinners and plays. . .

"It's not my business," I said. "Phyllida regards me as a lodging-house keeper, but, if your intentions are honourable, I think you should make them known to my brother, Lord Brackenbury." . .

Well, then he became nervous and sentimental. He wouldn't compromise Phyllida for the world; he'd every intention of speaking to Brackenbury when the time came, but as long as he was living on his pay and the war went on. . . *You* can imagine it. He was quite sincere. I told you I liked him; the only thing was that I didn't think him quite suitable for

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Phyllida. Upbringing, *milieu*. . . He was no fool; I felt he'd see it for himself before he'd been at the Hall half an hour. . .

To cut a long story short, I made him promise to hold no more communication with the child until he'd seen Brackenbury; and I told my brother to invite him there for a weekend. I didn't see very much of what happened, as I left the young people to themselves; but Will entirely bore out the vague, intangible feeling. . . Poor Colonel Butler *wasn't* at home; he made my boy's life a burden for days beforehand, asking what clothes he should take, and, when they were there, it was "I've been away so much that I don't know what the tariff is since the war: if I give ten shillings to the man who looks after me, how much ought I to give the butler?" . . . Things I should have thought a man knew without asking. Will was really rather naughty about it. . .

Brackenbury didn't see anything amiss. One's standard changes when one has done that sort of thing oneself. As I always said, "If you don't absorb her, she'll absorb you." And so it's proved. Ruth, of course, saw only the *romance* of it all. Goodness me, unless we're all twins, *some* one has to be the youngest colonel in the army. . . I don't know what people mean nowadays, when they talk about

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“romance.” . . Brackenbury and the whole family made the absurdest fuss—well, I won’t say that, because I liked young Butler; they made a *great* fuss. Even my nephew Culroyd, who’s in the Coldstream, was quite affable; “eating out of his hand” was Will’s phrase. So descriptive, I thought; Will has an extraordinary knack of hitting people off. . .

None of them seemed to think of the money side at all. Brackenbury was always improvident as a boy; but, until you’ve felt the pinch as Will and I have done, you don’t learn anything about values. Four thousand a year *sounds* very pleasant, but if it’s now only equal to *two*. . . And Phyllida has always lived up to anything she’s had. “I want it, therefore I must have it” has been her rule. Clothes, trinkets, little treats. . . She has four horses, eating their heads off, while my poor Will says he stands hat in hand before any one who’ll mount him. And her own little car. . . I know a brick wall when I see one; it was no use asking Phyllida whether she thought she could afford a husband as well as everything else. And a family; one has to look ahead. . . Colonel Butler wouldn’t be earning anything for years.

He told me so. I liked him more and more, because he was so simple and straightforward.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

After luncheon on the Saturday, we had a long talk together. I think I said I'd shew him the house. As you know, I yield to no one in my love for the dear old Hall, but Colonel Butler was like a child. You'd have said he'd never been inside a big house before; I don't believe he ever had. . . I took him everywhere, even Phyllida's rooms; it was well for him to see, I felt. . .

I remember he thanked me for having him invited to the Hall; from his tone you'd have said I was playing fairy god-mother, and he credited *me* with the very friendly reception that every one had given him. If the truth must be known—I wasn't taking sides; you must understand that!—I wanted *them* to see and I wanted *him* to see. . . As Will once said, "Half the world doesn't know how the other half lives." I felt that, when Colonel Butler stood there, everything sinking in. A man, I suppose, always is rather bewildered at the number of things a girl requires—frocks, gloves, hats, shoes, stockings. . . You mustn't think that I shewed him Phyllida's wardrobe! Goodness me, no! But her maid was in the room, getting things ready for the child's return from hunting. It was almost pathetic; one could fancy the poor young man counting on his fingers and saying: "She *must* have as good

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

a room as this, she'll want to keep on her present maid, I don't suppose she can even prepare a bath for herself or fasten her dress or brush her hair. . .” But it's better for that kind of thing to sink in at the beginning. . . Wherever I took him, he seemed to be saying : “ You can't do this sort of thing without so many servants, so much a year.” . . Will told me that the first night at dinner. . . But I'm afraid Will's naughty sometimes. . .

He thanked me—Colonel Butler did—in a way that suggested I hadn't shewn him *only* the house.

“ But I've enjoyed it,” I said. “ I'm only sorry you weren't able to go out with the rest.”

He told me he didn't hunt, he'd never had any opportunity. There was quite a list of things he didn't do, but he was very simple and straightforward about them. Don't you dislike that *aggressive* spirit which compels people to tell you how many they slept in one room and the night-schools they attended and so forth and so on? It makes me quite hot. I believe that's why they do it. . . There was nothing of that about Colonel Butler, though the army had made him a little *borné*. When I took him to see the stables, he shewed a certain sentimental interest in Phyllida's horses ; but his only comment was : “ I wish we were

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

given beasts like that in the army.” And it was the army in everything that he ate or read. Phyllida, as you know, has travelled more than most girls of her age; she wouldn’t like to drop that altogether on marrying; but, if you said “Egypt” to Colonel Butler, it was simply a place where he’d been invalided the first time he was wounded at Gallipoli. The war seems to make some men curiously material. . . . You understand I’m not criticizing him as a soldier; I’m sure he did excellent and useful work, but the war is only an *episode* in our lives. . . .

At tea he was so silent that I felt it was all sinking in very deep. At the end he said:

“Lady Ann, may I ask your advice? You are a woman of the world——”

“Goodness me, no!” I said. “Thirty years ago I may have counted for something there; but now I live under my own little vine and fig-tree; I see no one; I’m out of touch; you’d find me very old-fashioned, I fear.”

“You’ve been very kind to me,” he said, “and I want you to add to your kindness. I’m in love with Phyllida, as you know; and she—I think she quite likes me. Lord Brackenbury and every one here have been simply ripping. Please tell me what you think about it.”

“Do you mean, will she marry you?” I asked.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“Yes,” he said.

“Oh, I should think it very likely,” I told him; “I wondered whether you meant, would you make her *happy*?”

“I should certainly hope to do that,” he answered.

“We all *hope*,” I said. . .

My responsibility is confined to giving him a moment's pause for thought. Phyllida will tell you that I set him against her, poisoned his mind, I shouldn't wonder. . . It's most charitable to recognize that she really did not know what she was saying. I didn't talk about *him* at all; I talked about Will, about my nephew Culroyd, their friends, their lives. . . Any deductions were of *his* drawing; and, goodness me, one need not be branded a snob for seeing that they had been born and bred in different worlds. He seemed to think that *love* would overcome everything.

“If you're in *love*,” he kept saying, “these things don't matter, do they?”

What made him uncomfortable was the money question—the thought that he would be bringing literally nothing. I was most careful not to say anything, but every child knows that if you divide a sum of money by two. . . He *would* be living on Phyllida; and, if he loved her as much as he pretended, he would

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

always be feeling: "It's a frock for her or a suit of clothes for me." A very humiliating position for any man. . . I know it's the modern fashion to pretend that it doesn't matter; Phyllida says in so many words that the advantage of money to a girl is that she can marry where her heart leads her. A snare and a delusion, unless you mean that a woman with money and nothing else can occasionally buy herself *position*. . . I'm sure she picked that up from her poor mother. But, if Brackenbury married on his debts, he *did* bring *something*; I know we all had to work very hard for Ruth—"doing propaganda," as my boy Will says—to shew people that the marriage was *all right*. . . And it will be the same with Will, if he ever marries. . . Whoever he marries. . . He *does* bring *something*. . .

Colonel Butler asked if people would think Phyllida had thrown herself away on him. What could I say? . . . But for the war, he told me, he *would* be earning his own living; and, do you know?, that was the only time the cloven hoof appeared.

"We've all of us had to make sacrifices," I answered, "and the war ought not to be made either an excuse or—an opportunity."

Goodness me, you don't suppose my boy Will *enjoyed* the fatigues, the dangers. . . The

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

general was utterly callous towards his staff; but Will "stuck it out", as he would say. It was the soldier's part, and Colonel Butler knew as well as I did that it was only the war and the accident of being wounded that had thrown him across Phyllida's path.

"What do you mean by 'opportunity', Lady Ann?," he asked.

It was not easy to put into words. . . I sometimes feel that romance has gone to the head of some of our girls; first of all, a man had only to be in uniform, then he had only to be wounded. . . I *liked* Colonel Butler, but in the old days Phyllida would not have looked at him. . . And, goodness me, if you go back a generation, you can imagine what my father would have said if a man, however pleasant, with nothing but his pay and the clothes he stood up in. . . A soldier only by the *accident* of war. . . And in a regiment one had truly honestly never heard of. . .

"I don't feel I can help you," I said. "Times have changed, and my ideas are out of date. My brother may be different; have you spoken to him?" . . .

As a matter of fact any woman could have seen that it wasn't necessary to speak; Brackenbury, all of them were throwing themselves at the young man's head. That's why I felt

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

that, if *I* didn't—give him a pause for reflection, *no* one would. No, he hadn't said anything yet; it seemed such presumption that, though every one was gracious to him and Phyllida more than gracious, he wanted an outside opinion from some one whom he was good enough to call “a woman of the world.” Was he justified in saying anything while his financial prospects were so uncertain? Was it fair to ask Phyllida to give up so much of the life she was accustomed to? Would people think he was trying to marry her for her money? Was he entitled to ask her to wait?

I said. . . Phyllida was not present, you understand, so anything she tells you *can* only be the fruit of a disordered imagination. If Brackenbury sent her right away, the whole thing would be forgotten in two months. . . I really forget what I *did* say. . .

At dinner I could see that Colonel Butler was pondering my advice. At least, when I say “advice”, the limit of my responsibility is that perhaps the *effect* of our little talk was to check his natural impetuosity. Things were sinking in; his own good sense, more than anything I should have dared to say. . . Phyllida came down arrayed with quite unnecessary splendour—we were only the family and Colonel Butler. “Poor child,” I thought to myself,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“you fancy you’re attracting him when you’re only frightening the shy bird away; you imagine he’s admiring your frock when he’s only wondering how much it cost.” It was sinking in. . . If poor Ruth wanted her to throw herself away on a penniless surveyor, she might have told her that *simplicity* was the note to strike. Phyllida won’t think for herself, and Ruth is incapable of thinking for her. Good gracious! at dinner the child sat between Colonel Butler and my boy Will; I don’t encourage any girl to become a minx, but no man thinks the better of you for throwing yourself at his head. A little distance, a little indifference; until a man’s jealous, he doesn’t know he’s in love. She proved my point that night, both my points; Will was furious—and with reason—at being so uncivilly neglected; and the young paragon . . . he was simply sated. When the telegram arrived. . .

But I thought Phyllida would have told you about that; she has been so—immodestly candid. He returned to London next day, saying he’d received a wire overnight. I met him the following week, and he told me. Simple and straightforward as ever. . . He wanted to know how Phyllida was; had Lady Brackenbury thought him very rude? It was one thing or the other, he said: he could ask Phyllida to

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

marry him or he could go right away and forget about her . . . until he had something more to offer, I think he said. . . You and I know what *that* means. He was greatly upset and begged me to write occasionally when he was back at the front, just to tell him how Phyllida was; he wouldn't write to her himself, he said, because he wanted to leave her unembarrassed and it would be too painful for him.

“If she's still unmarried when I've made good,” he said, “it will be time to begin writing then.”

I suppose it was because Phyllida had never been in love before. . . I was ready to make allowances, but I was *not* prepared for the outburst, the extravagance, the self-indulgence of grief.

“Come, come, my dear!,” I said, “it would have been a very unsuitable match; and, if you haven't the sense to realize it, he has.”

She turned on me like a fury. . . I don't know what was in his letter of good-bye; but I suppose it was the usual romantic promise that he'd go away and make his fortune and then come back to claim her. (Good riddance, too, I thought; though I *liked* him.) Phyllida evidently treated it quite seriously. . .

“If he'd been mine for a week or a

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

day. . .” she kept sobbing. “I *know* he’ll be killed.” . .

Well, he wasn’t the only man in the world, but nothing that I could say was right. . .

“I think he behaved very properly,” I said. “He did me the honour to ask my advice; and, if I see him again, I shall tell him so.”

Then the flood-gates were opened. I—tell—you—as I tried to tell her, but she wouldn’t let me speak—that I *gave* no advice; I wanted him to proceed with caution, but I never even told him to wait and think. . . He did it entirely on his own initiative. What he quite rightly saw was that he could not take advantage of a young girl’s infatuation to marry her for her money. Phyllida really shocked me with the things she said, but I’m old enough to have learnt patience; it will not be very long before she begs my pardon and admits that perhaps a certain measure of wisdom may be conceded to age. . . In the meantime I prefer not to mix myself up in the broils and wrangles that seem a daily feature of life at the Hall. One makes a certain effort; and, after that, one has to leave people, in the homely old phrase, to stew in their own juice. . . I need hardly tell you that Brackenbury took her side. And poor Ruth, though I’ve learnt not to expect too much of Ruth after all these years. If, for

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

curiosity's sake, you ask them what I am supposed to have done, I should be deeply interested to know what they say. I have nothing but praise for the young man. When you are in the army, one private is as good as another; in hospital, you are a name, a bed, a case. That is so fine, I always think; it makes this truly a *people's war*. Colonel Butler would have gone to the Hall sooner or later without any prompting from me; and, once there, it was impossible for a man of any intelligence to pretend that there were no differences. . . It is so hard for me to put it into words without seeming a snob, but *you* understand what I mean. . .

You will find my boy Will there. He never seems to come home without picking up a cold, and the doctor has very sensibly recommended that he should be given an extension of leave. I was *not* very much set on his going, I admit. Goodness me, any silly little ill-bred things that Phyllida may pick up from her poor mother are forgotten as soon as they are said; I have no need to stand on my dignity. The sins of the fathers. . . Brackenbury *never* checks her. . . But you know what a girl is when she has had a disappointment, we must both of us have seen it a dozen times . . . some sort of natural recoil. If she throws herself at Will's head. . . With her money they'd have enough to live on, of

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

course, and young people ought to be very comfortable on four thousand a year. (It will be seven, when the parents die.) One need not look ahead to a family; but the grandfather, Ruth's father, would not be illiberal. But, though dear Will must marry some day, I dread the time when I must lose him. . .

III

LADY ANN SPENWORTH TOUCHES RELUCTANTLY ON DIVORCE

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion):
I have been brought up in a different school, that's all. "Whom God hath joined. . ." I don't ask any one to share my feelings and I'm not so foolish as to say I won't receive people who have taken a step which is at least legal, however much one may deplore the present ease of divorce. I do indeed try to differentiate in my attitude towards the guilty party, but in this I am more than ever "ploughing a lonely furrow," as my boy Will rather picturesquely expresses it. . .

Nowadays it is unfashionable to heed the teachings of religion; but I should have thought that the least consideration for patriotism, stability. . . My father's maxim was that family life is the *basis* of the state and that, when once you sanction the principle of divorce, you are undermining the foundations of the commonwealth. So I have at least been consistent. . .

That is perhaps more important than you think. The cynic cannot see that one's prin-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

ciples are independent of personal considerations. If they ever have the ill fortune to coincide even in appearance. . . Indeed yes! I happen to know what I am talking about. . . Forgive me if I spoke sharply; but one's nerves are not of iron, and it is not pleasant to be charged with conspiracy by the members of one's own family. Oh, not Spenworth! We have hardly met for years, I am thankful to say, though my husband has more than once tried to bring about a reconciliation. I have no personal animus; but, if the head of an honoured family chooses to drag his name in the mire, he shall at least not say that he has had countenance or support from even so humble a person as his sister-in-law. I was referring to the other side, my own people; I have an unforgiving little enemy, I fear, in my niece Phyllida; I should mind that less if Brackenbury and his poor wife did not seem to aid and abet her. Loyalty to the family, I should have thought. . . But, once again, I was brought up in a different school. I have told my brother, until I am tired, he ought to send her *right* away. It was a disappointment. . . Goodness me, it is a disappointment when one cries for the moon; and, though I thought this Colonel Butler a decent, manly fellow, he was really nobody. He saw, without my telling him, that every one

would say he was marrying her for her money. . . I won't call it an *escape* for Phyllida, because that always sounds so spiteful. But I will allow no one to say I made him throw her over so that I might keep her for my own boy!

I want you to tell me frankly how much you have heard. *Literally* nothing? Then you *will*—the very next time you go to the Hall. Not satisfied with inventing this abominable story, Phyllida feels it her duty to inflict it upon any one who will listen. But you must have seen about the divorce? Not even that? Well, you are wise; these things are unsavoury reading. The case was tried in the summer—"Spensworth's washing-day", as my boy called it—and the decree will be made absolute in a few weeks' time.

It is the fashion to say that my brother-in-law was more sinned against than sinning. Does not that formula always put you on your guard, so to say? He was a mere boy when he succeeded to the title; an immense estate like Cheniston offered too many temptations; his good looks made him a prey for all the harpies; he was too kindly ever to say "no" even to the most dissolute of his associates. And so forth and so on. . . Goodness me! Arthur—my husband—was two years younger; and, if his old father's iniquitous will did not

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

leave him enough money to tempt the hangers-on, at least he did not play ducks and drakes with what he had. It is more a question of character than of income. And Arthur had his share of good looks, as you can see from Will. No! Whatever Spenworth did, he could always *buy* indulgence. Establish for yourself the reputation of "a good fellow"—whatever that may mean—; and you will walk on roses all your life. . . .

One must assume that *he* thought the marriage would be a success, but I am sure no one else did. I *knew* Spenworth, you see. It is ancient history now, but it was only when I destroyed his last hope by marrying Arthur that he turned in desperation to Kathleen Manorby . . . after remaining disconsolate for nearly ten years. For her and her like my Will coined the description "chocolate-box beauty." She is still attractive after twenty years. . . . I tried to warn her, so far as one could without having one's motives misconstrued; but she was glamoured by the money and the title. She had several offers, I believe, from men rather more in her own *milieu*, but it was a case of not being able to afford the luxury of marrying a poor man. Otherwise her first love, young Laughton, who broke his heart over her and transferred to the Indian Army.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

. . . I warned her that Spenworth would be unfaithful before they had been married a year, but she was too sure of her own charm and power.

Within a year! Within three months. . . Kathleen is a fool, but one may feel for any woman who has had to put up with so many sordid humiliations. If she had borne him a son, it might have been different, but one girl after another. . . Four of them, and no heir to Cheniston. Superstitious people would tell you that it was a judgement on Spenworth for his past life and on her for her treatment of poor young Laughton. . . And, little by little, Spenworth seemed to lose all regard for human decency, until one was tempted to forget poor Kathleen's disappointment and to feel that Providence had decided that no son of his should ever reign in his stead. I am utterly free from superstition myself; but it did seem curious. . . He, I fancy, never quite gave up hope; as I felt it my duty to tell him, he was on such good terms with this world that he could not imagine another world in which his behaviour might be less leniently regarded. When the *fourth* girl was born and we realized that Will *must* ultimately succeed, I suggested that something might now be done to enable our boy to live in a manner befitting the heir

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

to an historic title. Spenworth gave one of his great laughs and begged me to wait until he was dead before I cast lots for his raiment, adding that he had no intention of dying yet awhile. The usual blend of arrogance and blasphemy. . .

Yes, my husband is the only brother. It is a matter of rather less than no interest to either of us, for Spenworth will last our time. His constitution is proof against even his own assaults on it. Besides, one would hate the idea of waiting to step into a dead man's shoes. . . So really the heir is Will, but *he* is in no hurry; Cheniston is a night-mare to him, he does not *desire* the place. Perhaps he dreads having to cleanse the Augean stable. You have never stayed there, of course; I can say without unkindness that, wherever a naked savage could have made one error in taste, poor Kathleen has made three. . .

It was Will who brought the news that a divorce was pending. One *guessed* that Spenworth and Kathleen were living apart, but she had let slip so many opportunities. . . One asked oneself what new provocation could have roused her.

“Oh, it's a put-up job,” said Will. “As Aunt Kathleen hasn't produced a son, Spenworth wants to get free of her and marry some one else. A man at the club told me that he

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

was allowing her twenty thousand a year for his liberty.”

Really and truly, the interest that total strangers take in other people's affairs the moment that sinister word “divorce” is pronounced. . . Within two days the story was on every one's lips: Spenworth was the one topic of conversation, and everything was known. I think it is called a petition for restitution. Alas! for twenty years it would always have been easy to produce evidence of Spenworth's vagaries; now, I gathered, he was to “desert” Kathleen and then refuse to obey some order to come back. I don't profess to understand the subject; it is wholly distasteful to me. . .

“And what then?” I asked.

“A decree *nisi*,” Will told me. “I gather my next aunt has been chosen already.”

I will not mention her name. She who marries a man that has been put away. . . Perhaps I take too lofty a view of human nature, knowing my brother-in-law as I do; but, until he *actually* marries her, I shall continue to look for a sign of grace.

“And now perhaps Cheniston is going to have an heir after all,” said Will.

I confess that I was thinking not at all of Cheniston at this season, though a second marriage may revolutionize everything. The

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

shame of seeing my husband's elder brother, the head of an historic family, in the Divorce Court. . . And already thinking of another union with goodness knows who; and, once he begins, there is no reason why he should ever stop. I am told that there are more than two thousand cases waiting to be tried. The war! I always felt that you could not have an upheaval on that scale without paying for it afterwards. There are moments when I feel glad that my dear father did not live to see this *bouleversement*. . . Mere beasts of the field. . .

"I cannot discuss this," I told Will.

My husband had heard the story too and was so much shocked that I dared not allude to it. We could *do* nothing. . .

I *did* make one effort. I tried to persuade my brother to reason with her. The opinion of an outsider—and Brackenbury has the reputation, not perhaps very well-founded, if you consider his own life, of being a man of the world. . . He would only say that, though "dear old Spenworth" was "no end of a good fellow", he was also "no end of a bad husband" and that, if Kathleen had had sense or spirit, she'd have divorced him a dozen years ago. Then, against my own inclinations, I went to see Kathleen and literally begged her to reconsider her decision before it was too

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

late. One might as profitably have spoken to the dead. . .

She was not antagonistic in any way. Indeed, our meeting would have been profoundly interesting, if it had not been so painful. She was still in love with Spenworth. Men like that, dissolute and unfaithful, seem to have an animal magnetism which holds certain women in complete subjection. Kathleen was *miserable* at the thought of parting from her scamp of a husband.

“I couldn’t do it if I didn’t love him,” she cried.

And, if you please, I was left to understand that she was effacing herself, giving him up and making way for another woman simply because she fancied that he would be happier. I confess I should have had little patience with her, if she had not been so pitiable. Life was a blank without Spenworth.

“Then why,” I asked, “do you cut your own throat and drag the name of the family through the mire? Have you *no* sense of your position after all these years, *no* feeling for the rest of us?”

“It’s for him,” she said.

And I verily believe that, if he had told her literally to cut her throat, she would have done it. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I have never been greatly attached to Kathleen. These backboneless, emotional women. . . But I felt that *somebody* must do *something* for her. She came to Mount Street, and I reasoned with her again; at Cheniston I may be less than the dust, but under my own vine and fig-tree. . . In London I *have* a certain *niche* and I was bound to warn her that a divorced woman is *mal vue* in certain circles and among certain persons who sometimes do me the honour to dine at my house. There would be occasions on which I should be unable to invite her. You would have said that she didn't care. . . She was staying with us when the case was tried; she stayed all through the summer, four months. No, you mustn't give me credit to which I'm not entitled. I felt very little sympathy when she proved obdurate; but, if one *could* do anything to brighten her lot. . . I gave one or two little parties. . . Trying to take her out of herself. To some extent I succeeded. Kathleen has still the remains of good looks, though that fair fluffiness is not a type that I admire. When I refused to let her sit and mope in her room, she made an effort and assumed quite an attractive appearance. Several men were impressed. . .

There was one in particular. I won't give you his name. . . And yet I don't know why

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I shouldn't; if Phyllida persuades you to listen to her story, I am sure she will spare you nothing. He was introduced to me as Captain Laughton; and the name conveyed nothing to me until some one reminded me of the old boy-and-girl attachment before Kathleen married Spensworth, when this man Laughton pretended to be heart-broken and disappeared to Central India. They had not met for twenty years, but, when he read of the divorce proceedings, I can only assume that he sought her out. Will met him at his club, I think, and the man virtually invited himself to come and dine. I was not greatly enchanted by him at our first meeting, but he was a new interest to Kathleen (I knew nothing until *days* afterwards when I tackled her about her really unaccountable behaviour with him). . . And I must confess that there were moments when poor Kathleen was a grave trial and I repented my impetuosity in asking her to stay with us. Captain Laughton came a second time and a third. By the end of a month he had really done us the honour to make our house his own. . .

There are things I can say to you that I would never breathe to a man. I, personally, never make a mystery of my age; you will find it in all the books, every one knows I am six years older than Arthur, four years older than

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Spensworth—why conceal it? I wished Kathleen could have been equally frank, could have seen herself as I saw her. She is within a few months of thirty-nine, with four strapping girls; one does expect a certain dignity and restraint at that age. I know what you are going to say! We of the older generation *usually* expect more than we receive. I have learnt *that* lesson, thank you! Kathleen seemed to fancy that she was back in the period of this boy-and-girl attachment to which I have alluded. She and Captain Laughton were inseparable. He took her to *dances* . . . as if she were eighteen! Indecent, I considered it. And I wondered what her girls thought of their mother,—if they're capable of thinking at all. I don't associate *brains* with that chocolate-box beauty. . . Dances, dinners, little expeditions. Every one was beginning to smile. . .

“If she's not careful,” Will said to me one day, “she'll cook her own goose as well as Spensworth's.”

I had to ask him to express his fears in simpler language.

“There is such a person as a King's Proctor,” he said, “though they don't seem aware of it. If she plays the fool with Laughton, the decree won't be made absolute; and she and Spensworth will be tied to each other

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

for the rest of their lives. That would hardly suit *their* book.”

Do you ever feel that you have strayed into a new world? The fact of divorce. . . And then this light-hearted pairing off: Spenworth with some woman who had been setting her cap at him for years, Kathleen with the love of her youth. They had lost all reverence for marriage, the family; it was a game, a dance—like that figure in the lancers, where you offer your right hand first and then your left. . . I made Will explain the whole position to me again and again until I had it quite clear in my mind. The King’s Proctor, as he described him—rather naughtily—, was “a licensed spoilsport”, who intervened in cases where the divorce was being arranged by collusion or where both parties had sinned.

“The office seems a sinecure,” I commented.

Those two thousand petitions. . . They stick in my throat.

“As a rule people don’t take risks,” Will explained. “And it’s not often to the advantage of an outsider to come in and upset the apple-cart. You or the gov’nor or I,” he said, “could do a lot of mischief, if we liked; but we’re interested parties, and it wouldn’t look well.”

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I confess that I did not share his tenderness towards what is nothing but a life of premeditated sin. . . Yes, I know it's *legal*, but Parliament can make a thing legal without making it *right*. The whole subject, however, was very distasteful, and I did not pursue it. That night I let fall a hint to Arthur, but he was not disposed to take any action.

“She's a bigger fool than I took her for,” was all he would say. “She's endangering her own future and Spensworth's and playing into our hands if we chose to take advantage of our opportunity.”

Whether Arthur spoke to her or not, I cannot say; but I know that she received a very frank warning from her own solicitors. Spensworth, too, did us the honour to write and say: “*For heaven's sake keep that—*” I forget the actual phrasing—“*keep that man away from Katie, or he'll do us in.*” Spensworth was always noted for his elegance of diction. . . If a pawn could speak, I'm sure its feelings would be very much what mine were: pushed hither and thither in a game that I did not begin to understand. I had never asked Captain Laughton to the house; he invited himself, and by the same token I knew that it was no good telling him to stay away. My house was not my own, my soul was not my own. And I

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

had that hopeless sense that, whatever I did, I should be wrong. . . .

It was a trying season. . . . Their *behaviour* was so extraordinary! I pinched myself and said: "This is the woman who cried to you because she was losing Spenworth, because the light was being taken out of her life. She was sacrificing herself to make Spenworth happy!" I admit that I was taken in. She may have been sincere at the time, but that is only the more discreditable. To cry for Spenworth one day and for her Captain Laughton the next. . . . I use the word literally; if a single day passed without her seeing him, she moped—for all the world like a love-sick girl who thinks her sweetheart is tiring of her. And when they met. . . .

I have told you that people were beginning to smile, and that should have been humiliating enough to a woman who has achieved at least a dignity of *position*; one said that there was nothing in it, but that had no effect. Anything connected with divorce seems to breed a morbid curiosity; they were being spied on, whispered about; people who did not wait to consider that Kathleen was nearly forty assumed that she would inevitably marry again and decided no less obstinately that she would marry Laughton. Then the tittle-tattle press laid hold of her. I

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

am told that certain women, probably known to both of us, earn a *livelihood* by collecting gossip at one's dinner-table and selling it at so much a scandal to these wretched papers. One is quite defenceless. . . I noticed for myself—and others were indefatigable in shewing me—little snippets saying that Lady Spenworth and Captain Laughton had been seen at this or that garish new restaurant. I believe that Kathleen's solicitors wrote to her a second time. . .

A man at such a season does occasionally contrive to keep his head, but Captain Laughton was no less blind and uncontrolled than Kathleen. Will and I had arranged to go away for a few days' motoring at the end of the summer. A car *and* unlimited petrol—for the first time since the war—; Sussex; the New Forest; perhaps a day in Dorset to take luncheon with the Spokeleighs; Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and up into Hereford. Delightful. . . We had planned it months ahead—before this unhappy divorce. The problem of Kathleen called for solution; we could not conveniently take her in the car, and, if I left her in Mount Street, I did want to be assured that there would be no unpleasantness. . .

“Captain Laughton,” I said one night, when he had telephoned to know whether he might dine. It was on the tip of my tongue

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

to say: "My good man, don't ask *me!* Refer your invitations to my cook. . ." He was such a *boy* that I never spoke to him as I truly honestly think he deserved. . . "Captain Laughton," I said, "will you promise that, while I'm away, you won't come here or try to see Lady Spenworth? She is in a position," I said, "where you can easily compromise her; a severer critic might say that you had compromised her already. If you have her interests at heart, you have a chance of proving your friendship to her. . ."

Am I unduly idealizing the past if I say that in my youth it would have been unnecessary to speak like that to any man? Captain Laughton was no longer a boy. . . Assuredly, in the school in which I was brought up, if one *had* spoken, one's word would have been law. . .

"Oh, Lady Ann, I've been talking to Kitty about that," he answered. I think "jaunty" is the word to describe his manner; great assurance, good humour, no thought that any one would even dream of giving him a rebuff. "We were thinking," he continued, "that it would be such fun if we could come too. I have a car, we wouldn't get in your way; but we can hardly go off unattended, and I quite agree with what you say about not compromising Kitty in London."

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

He took my breath away. *We* this, *we* that. Perhaps I shall take away yours if I tell you that I acquiesced in his really impudent proposal. Not without a struggle, you may be sure; and not without declaring my own terms. If there were any unpleasantness, *I* should be held responsible. I ordained that, if I had to play the dragon, I would be a dragon in earnest; Kathleen should come in my car, while my Will went with Captain Laughton. Can't you picture how the other arrangement would have worked out? The two of them mooning like rustic lovers, forgetful of time and everything else, the car breaking down to prolong their stolen joy. . . My dear, you could see it in their faces when I launched my ultimatum. . .

And you could see it a hundred times a day when our tour began. Any excuse to slip away and be together. When I suggested a *détour* to call on Sir Charles Spokeleigh, I was told at once that Captain Laughton did not know him and that Kathleen disliked his wife—or had a head-ache, I forget which. Kathleen always had a head-ache if one suggested a little constitutional before dinner. And Captain Laughton insisted on staying behind with her. There was no great harm, perhaps, in an out-of-the-way village which had escaped the contamina-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

tion of the London press, but in places like Dorchester, Gloucester, Hereford. . . One was known; the papers would announce us among the new arrivals: "Lady Spenworth, Lady Ann Spenworth, Captain Laughton. . ." and so on and so forth. They could not afford to take the slightest risk. If I had yielded to their entreaties and then the car had broken down. . . The King's Proctor or whoever he is would never believe that it was an accident and that they were truly innocent. There would be the record in the register of the hotel. . .

I am thankful to say that we were spared all catastrophes; and I frankly enjoyed the tour, though it was impossible to escape a feeling of conspiracy. The only hitch occurred at the end as we came within thirty miles of Brackenburg. The roads there are not all that could be desired, and I should not have contemplated for a moment the cross-country journey, were it not that I saw an opportunity of healing the unhappy breach with my niece Phyllida. At present she is so terribly and unjustly bitter that there is nothing she will not believe and say. It occurred to me that, if I, the older woman, made the first advance. . . A gracious phrase or two, telling her that I could not pass her home—my *old* home—with

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

the feeling that any rancour remained. . . You understand. It is always worth a little inconvenience to be gracious. . . And she had been speaking quite wickedly about me. . .

We lunched that day at Norton and had arranged to sleep at Rugely. I need hardly say that, when I suggested a *détour* to Brackenbury—an extra forty miles at most—, Kathleen discovered that she was tired out and Captain Laughton trumped up his usual excuse that he didn't know my brother and disliked "butting in" on strangers. . . Ridiculous! I've never met a man more completely self-possessed. . . For once I broke my rule and said that they might go on by themselves and order rooms for us in Rugely. They would leave a note for us at the General Post Office to say where we should meet them.

"Drive carefully!," Captain Laughton called out, as we started from Norton. "It will be the devil and all, if anything happens to you."

I did not understand this new-born solicitude until my boy Will undertook to enlighten me. And then I saw that perhaps I had been really imprudent. After a fortnight of heart-breaking discretion, I *had* allowed these two feather-brained creatures to drive off alone. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

If they failed to secure rooms and could not communicate with us in time. . . If for any reason we did not meet at the *rendez-vous*. . . I can assure you that I gave myself a headache, just thinking of one possible disaster after another. It would *not* have passed unnoticed; we had received ample evidence of that. Most dreadful misconstructions would be placed on their conduct—and on mine. The King's Proctor—really, the *name* is so absurd; one makes a mental picture of some strange court functionary taken straight from the pages of that delightful Lewis Carroll book—I became haunted by visions of the King's Proctor intervening to stay the divorce proceedings. And then, as Will said so lucidly, Spensworth and Kathleen would be tied to each other for the rest of their lives; gone would be her St. Martin's summer of romance, gone would be—no, romance is always to me a singularly beautiful word; I decline to associate it with what my boy calls Spensworth's latest shuffle of the matrimonial pack. The worst thing of all was that *we* should be held responsible.

“I wonder what Spensworth would do if the positions were reversed,” said Will. “If the gov'nor were elder brother and wanted an heir, if *he* had the chance of stopping it and keeping

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

the inheritance for himself. . . I wonder if he'd be able to resist."

"Temptation only seems strong to those who do not wish to withstand it," I said.

Our arrival at the Hall was hardly auspicious, as my head-ache had been growing so steadily worse that I had to ask my sister-in-law Ruth to let me lie down if there was to be any question of my driving on to Rugely. And, though I felt better after a cup of tea, the pain returned when I was left for a moment with Phyllida. I sought an opportunity for my little speech. Phyllida. . . It would be absurd to feel resentment against a mere child whose nerves were obviously unstrung, but I wondered then and I wonder now what *my* dear mother would have said if I had spoken, looked, behaved in such a way to *any* older woman. When she had *slammed* her way out of the room, I sank into a chair, trembling. *You* know whether I am a limp, nervous woman; when Ruth came in to ask—without a spice of welcome—whether we would not stay to dinner, I was too much upset to speak; I just nodded. . . If I had been stronger, I would not have remained another moment in the house; but Will had disappeared, and I was unequal to returning alone.

Brackenbury had the consideration to ask if

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I would not stay the night. I explained the very delicate position in which we had left Kathleen and Captain Laughton.

“Well, go if you feel up to it,” said Brackenbury in what I thought was an off-hand manner to adopt to his sister. “Or send Will, if anybody can find what’s happened to him. So long as they’ve some one to chaperon them, they’re all right.”

I would have stayed if Will could have stayed with me. I would have gone if that had been the only means of keeping by his side. Do you know, I had the feeling that in the length and breadth of that house he was the only one who cared whether I was well or ill, whether I lived or died . . . almost. . .

“I’m not sure that I *care* to leave my mother while she’s like this,” said my boy rather timidly, when he was fetched in to join the council. It is unfashionable, I believe, for the modern son to shew his mother any overt tenderness. . .

“Well, some one’s got to go,” said Brackenbury with unnecessary impatience. “It’s all up, if you leave those two without any one to keep them in countenance.”

“We will both go,” I said.

When the car was ordered, we went into the hall and waited. . . After about twenty

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

minutes Brackenbury rang to find out the reason for the delay. The servant came back to say that part of what I think is called the magneto was missing. I chose my word carefully: not "injured" or "worn-out," but "missing"—as though some one had invaded the garage and removed the requisite part. . .

Brackenbury seemed to lose his head altogether.

"It's ten o'clock," he roared. "If you don't get to Rugely by mid-night, can't you see that you'll be too late to stop a scandal? If you *want* to stay the divorce, say so at once, say that you're scheming to tie up Spensworth in your own interests; and, by God, if it comes off, I'll say it until every decent man and woman will walk out of a room when any of your gang come into it. . . Phyllida," he shouted. "Order your car! Will can drive it. . ."

"Aren't you afraid he may lose his way?," asked Phyllida.

I don't attempt to reproduce her voice. . . It was silky . . . oh, and wicked! I *tell* myself not to mind, I try to remember that she was overwrought and that her father was a criminal not to insist on her going away. Phyllida was deliberately charging us with a conspiracy to interrupt the divorce proceedings so that in time

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

—goodness me, when Arthur and I are dead and buried!—our boy Will might succeed. Cheniston is a noble seat; the Spensworth title is old and was once honoured; but neither for my husband nor my son do I want them—at *that* cost.

I said nothing. . . I believe I murmured to myself: “You wicked child”; but, literally, I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t see . . . or hear. Brackenbury was making furious arrangements. As in a dream I saw Ruth being wrapped in a fur-coat. . . A car came to the door and drove away. . . I asked my boy to ascertain which was my room and to lend me the support of his arm up the stairs. . .

Ruth telegraphed next day from Rugely—just two words—“*All well.*” . . .

Will and I returned to London by train. Phyllida was in the hall, reading the telegram, as I appeared.

“It nearly came off,” she said. “I’m sorry—for your sake—that you’ve had a disappointment. Time, you will find, works wonders; and some day, perhaps, you will be more grateful than I can expect to find you now. If I were you, I would go right away. . .”

What she *intended* to convey I have no more idea than the man in the moon. . . The

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

night before, her meaning was *never* in doubt; and I am waiting for her to put it into words, to charge Will or me or both of us with deliberately damaging our car. . .

But you will see that anything she says in her present state, poor child, must be accepted with charitable reserve. . .

IV

LADY ANN SPENWORTH IS CONTENT WITH A LITTLE MUSIC

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion):
I am easily satisfied, I ask for nothing better than a little music after dinner. If only the rising generation were *rather* less self-conscious. . . . When I was a girl, it was a law of the Medes and Persians that, if any one asked us to play or sing, we at *once* complied. None of this modern absurdity of not playing in public, insisting on the hush of the grave, looking round the room first to see if by chance there is some great *maestro* present. . . . When I tell you that I once sang before Jenny Lind, being too young and ignorant to know who she was. . . . And no one could have been sweeter. . . .

I am not a *musician* in any sense of the word. (I am almost tempted to add: "Thank goodness!") When one sees and hears the devotees at Covent Garden, talking a language of their own which I am quite sure half of them don't understand, ready to set one right in a moment if one *presumes* to offer an opinion. . . . If any one said to me: "I want to be a social

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

success and I don't know how to begin," I should answer: "Learn the musical jargon and use it *rudely*, especially to people who for one reason or another have not had to *fight* their way into any little *niche* that they may occupy." I won't mention names. . . . But I see you have guessed! And do you not agree? That man, for all his millions, would be received *nowhere* but for his alleged love of music; but take a double box at the opera, go every night, allow yourself to be seen at all the concerts, give immense parties of your own, support and bring out three new geniuses a month—everything is forgiven you!

I did not know him before the war . . . when, by the way, I understand he passed by the name of Sir Adolf Erckmann. One saw, indeed, his not very prepossessing beard and bald head protruding from his box—a red, anxious face and single eye-glass, positively *scattering* bows right and left at the people he had succeeded in getting to know in his upward progress. Originally, I believe, a German-Jewish banker, with immense interests of all kinds in every part of the world and a very un-savoury domestic reputation. He was nothing to me, nor I to him; and it would have been no true kindness for me to "take him up," as Connie Maitland was always urging me to do.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

No doubt we should have been surfeited with invitations to Westbourne Terrace and Rock Hill; but we are not *yet* reduced to scouring London for free meals, like some people we could think of, and, without being cynical, I always felt that the Erckmanns would try to use us as a means of getting to know Spensworth and Brackenbury so that in time their triumphal progress might carry them to Cheniston and the Hall. If I could have done any good, it would have been a different matter; but you remember the Erckmanns were a test-case before the war, in the days when the energy of Christine Malleson and my Lady Maitland and the rest had broken down so many barriers which hitherto had been at least a convenience. Not only Spensworth and Brackenbury, but a dozen more as good as said that they could not continue to know me if I consented to know Erckmann. . . .

When the war came, things materially altered. The Erckmanns vanished—in every sense of the word. The old friends, who had *plagued* me to receive him, now denied with cursing and swearing, as it were, saying: “I know not the man.” One or two of the radical papers made a bitter personal attack on him because harmless German hair-dressers and waiters were being interned while this wealthy

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

international financier, who *was* in a position to collect information and influence opinion, was left at large, thanks to highly-placed friends and a title. They said that some of the Cabinet were absolutely dependent on him. . . . Though I saw nothing of the man, I could not help hearing of him, for the mob broke his windows in Westbourne Terrace whenever there was an air-raid; they said he was shewing lights to guide the Zeppelins to Paddington. Whether there was a *word* of truth in it I can't say. . . . And, when he erected an enormous hospital at Rock Hill, even this was not accounted to him for righteousness: the men there held him to ransom, his own patients. Some one would whisper that he had a secret wireless apparatus on his roof; and immediately Sir Adolf would build another ward or a recreation-room or a picture theatre. . . .

And in another sense they disappeared: as Will said, "Plant an Erckmann in England, and up comes an Erskine." Poor souls, if they had changed their names *before* the war and if some one could have performed an operation to rid Sir Adolphus of that appalling guttural accent. . . . I really began to feel sorry for them when all their friends—led, if you please, by my Lady Maitland—turned the cold shoulder. "Satisfy me," I said to Arthur, "that he is

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

a truly loyal subject, and I should like to see if I could not shew him a little kindness.”

“He’s a noxious creature,” said Arthur with his usual intolerance, “but all these stories of spying and of blackmailing ministers are sheer flumdididdle. It isn’t worth his while. Whoever wins, Erskine will make money. He’s technically loyal; but he’s a man without patriotism, because the whole world is his country. For the Lord’s sake, don’t throw *your* mantle over him; as long as there *are* national distinctions, I object to the way these international Jew financiers settle in England for their own convenience.”

“I am not,” I said, “concerned with that. You may be right. Perhaps we should all of us have done better to hold aloof and offer him no welcome at the outset. But, do you know, I feel a certain responsibility? *Having* been received here, having *poured* money like water into the pockets of his so-called friends, will he not form a low view of our sincerity and goodwill if every one abandons him at a time like this? I am disinterested: we have accepted nothing from him, we can look to him for nothing; but there is a reproach which I feel it my duty to remove.”

I could not make Arthur see that people like Connie Maitland, *liée* with the poor man one

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

moment and throwing him to the wolves the next. . . We are not *all* of us like that in England.

“Well, for Heaven’s sake, don’t ask him when *I’m* here,” was the utmost encouragement I got from my husband.

Truly honestly, I think this stubborn opposition drove me perhaps farther than I had first intended to go. A day or two later I found myself in the same house as Sir Adolphus and I *spoke* to him. . .

“You,” I said, “do not know me; and I only know you by sight, though I have long been acquainted with your record of generous support to the cause of music. Will you allow a total stranger to tell you her disgust with the venomous attacks which have been made on you since the beginning of the war?”

Little enough, you may think; but I believe those were the first kind words that he had heard for three or four years. The man is *not* prepossessing, but we formed quite a friendship. . .

“Will not you and Lady Erskine,” I said, “come and dine with me some night? I am not in a position to *entertain* in any sense of the word; my boy is at the front, my husband is away on business; but perhaps, if a family party would not bore you. . .”

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Though I *called* myself a total stranger, he knew very well who I was; indeed he told me that he had always wanted to meet Brackenbury and Spenworth (the Cheniston Romneys were, of course, his excuse). . . We arranged a night . . . though, when the time came, there was not more than the three of us. My relations with Spenworth are not so cordial that I derive the least pleasure from seeing him at my table; and one truly honestly *never* knows how he is going to behave. Brackenbury. . . If you do not want to accept an invitation, it is surely possible to decline it *civilly*. . .

“*That* fellow!,” cried Brackenbury. “He ought to be interned.”

“You really must not talk such nonsense,” I said. “He is as loyal as you are.”

“I wouldn’t touch him with a pole *before* the war,” said Brackenbury with his wonted elegance. “But *now*, when even his best friends refuse to meet him—”

“Exactly,” I interrupted. “You would like him to feel that that is our standard of sincerity and good-will.”

“But how is it *your* concern?,” he asked. “You’ve kept clear of that gang in the past, so why dirty your hands with it now? If you fancy you’re going to get money out of him, or a job for Will, I warn you that you’re no

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

match for him. He'll *use* you readily enough, but he never does anything for anybody without looking for a return. We don't *want* these gentry in England."

"I met him," I answered. "I liked him, I was *sorry* for him. And, if I try to shew him a little kindness, I really cannot allow you, Brackenbury, to make yourself a ruler and a judge. Do I gather that you and Ruth would prefer *not* to dine?"

"If it's money you want, I'd almost pay you *not* to meet him. *That's* how I feel about it."

All this, you understand, about a man he hardly knew by sight! . . . I found it in my heart to wish that Brackenbury *had* been present when the Erskines dined. *Nothing* could have been more charming. He talked too wonderfully about music; I asked him a little about himself, *he* asked me about *myself*—that delightful first exchange when you are laying the foundations of friendship. Having no children himself, he was of course most anxious to hear about Will—what he had done before the war, where he was in France at present, what he proposed to do when the war was over. . . . As *he* had introduced the subject, I told him frankly that I found great difficulty in making up my mind and should be truly

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

grateful if he would tell me, from his *very* wide experience, what he considered most hopeful. He promised to let me know; and, a few days later, when I was dining with him, he asked whether I expected Will home any time soon on leave, as he always had a certain number of openings in his own various businesses. This from the man who never did anything for anybody unless he expected a rich return, the man who *used* people but never allowed any one to use *him*. . . I had *asked* for nothing; in my haste I had told Arthur that we could *look* to him for nothing. And if you knew the long agony of anxiety that I have endured. . . I may say, ever since we took Will away from Eton. I have seen my darling home in Mount Street threatened. . . The war was a god-send: *something* to keep him occupied, a *little* pocket-money; and, so long as he was not in danger, I prayed for it to go on. . .

“My dear Sir Adolphus,” I said, “the *first* time he comes home you shall meet him.”

That was in October. Suddenly, lo and behold! the armistice was upon us, and the whole *world* was looking out for jobs. I laboured and *strove* to bring Will home; and, the moment he arrived, I invited Sir Adolphus to dine. He telegraphed that he was at Rock Hill, but could we not spend a few days with

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

him there? My maid was out. I began to pack with trembling fingers. . .

Is it not curious that difficulties always seem to come from the *least* expected quarter? Here was Will's whole future secured; he had woken up, as it were, with a golden spoon in his mouth. My dear, I had the *utmost* difficulty in persuading him to come at all. What he wanted was a holiday, he said; after all he had gone through, he was entitled to a good time. And, though he had never met the Erskines, he had formed an unreasoning prejudice against them which was incomprehensible in any one of his breadth of mind. . . I do assure you that we reached a deadlock.

"Will," I said very firmly, "I *ask* you to come."

"And I refuse point-blank," he answered.

"You will be sorry for it later," I warned him, "when the opportunity has slipped beyond recall."

"Something will turn up," he predicted. Then, perhaps, he saw how his refusal was paining me, for he added: "I've fixed up with some fellows weeks ago that we'd all meet and see life." . . .

I had already begun a letter to Lady Erskine, asking if we might postpone our visit for a day or two, when Will came in—very

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

much upset—to say that his friends had broken faith with him; one had already gone to the country, the other two were busy presenting letters of introduction and arranging interviews. . . . As if I had not known all along that, the moment war was over, the whole world would begin looking for jobs. . . .

“Now,” I said, “you can have no objection to accepting the Erskines’ invitation.”

“Barring that I don’t want to go,” Will rejoined. “I draw the line at Jews at all times and I don’t in the least want to start work till I’ve had a holiday.”

“But others are already in the field,” I urged. Lady Maitland shewed the sublime assurance to reestablish communications and to ask Sir Adolphus, in the name of their *old friendship*, to find an opening for her second boy! “You can have all the holidays you want later.”

To my delight I saw Will weakening.

“What’s the management like?,” he asked.

“Oh, my dear, everything is incredibly perfect. The house, the food, the music—”

“You may ’ave the music—fer me,” said Will. (It was some allusion which I did not understand.) “Oh, all right! I’ll come. But I intend to have my fun out of it.”

You have stayed at Rock Hill? No? Well,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I am not exaggerating when I use the word "perfection." A seventeenth-century Italian palace with gardens that put Cheniston and my brother-in-law Spenworth to *shame*; pictures that one somehow always thought were in the National Gallery. . . . And, if you care for material comfort, as—I am not ashamed to say—I *do*, not having enjoyed enough of it to become *blasée*. . . . "If you cannot be rich yourself, know plenty of rich people," as Will said the first night. . . . In jest, of course. . . .

If I wanted to make a criticism, I should say that Lady Erskine might have chosen her party on less catholic lines. As patron of the arts, Sir Adolphus is of course brought into contact with an entire world of artists, musicians, actors and the like which is outside my ken. He confessed that he liked "mixing people up" and trying to break down the very rigid barriers which separate the artistic people from the rest of us. I have not the slightest objection to that *on principle*, but, when it necessitates meeting a number of half-naked young actresses who truly honestly have no place in the artistic or any other world. . . . And when they are allowed to set the tone of the house. . . .

I reminded myself that, with the exception of Brackenbury Hall, I had not stayed in a country-house for I don't know how long.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Nothing, I determined, should surprise me; in Rome. . . And so forth and so on. We arrived in time for dinner, and almost the first thing I knew was that Sir Adolphus was pressing upon me something which I think he called a "Maiden's Sigh", which of course I imagined was the well-known hock of that name. *Why* hock before dinner? Sherry, if you like. . . But I had determined that nothing should surprise me. I drank it—what it contained, I do not know, but it was cold and, I suppose, very strong, for it went *straight* to my head! I could drink *nothing* at dinner until I had consumed an entire tumbler of cold water. Indeed, I hardly knew what I was saying, but Sir Adolphus was talking so interestingly about Rossini that I only wanted to listen. . . Later, when I had proved myself a good listener, it would be my turn to talk about Will. . .

Now, you dine out very much more than I do. On those *rare* occasions when you meet somebody who *can* talk, is it not heart-breaking to have the conversation interrupted before you have half finished it? In the old days, when one turned like an automaton to one's other-hand neighbour half-way through dinner, it was sufficiently exasperating; but one *did* hope that, if one had not wearied one's companion too unwarrantably, he would come up in the drawing-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

room and resume what he had been saying. Nowadays dinner is little more than a bribe offered to so many women and men to induce them to play bridge with *you* rather than with some one *else*. The tables were already set, when we left the dining-room; Lady Erskine's last words were: "You won't be long, will you?"

I do not play. Even in old days I never mastered whist. And I hope you will not cry "Sour grapes", if I say that I do not *wish* to learn. I ask nothing better than a little music after dinner. If not too modern, it does not interfere with conversation, whereas the sight of a card-table freezes the most eloquent lips. . .

"What about a rubber before the others come up?," asked one of these young actresses. I had not caught her name and perhaps I am doing her a grave injustice; but, if I had not Lady Erskine's implied guarantee, I should have considered her. . . Well, let me say I should have been *very* much surprised at being asked to meet her. . .

"I am afraid you must not count on me," I said.

The young woman reckoned up the numbers present and asked:

"What about poker, then?"

Here, I am thankful to say, Lady Erskine

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

came to my rescue, and we contrived to exist with nothing more exciting than conversation until the men joined us. Then, I think, something must have been whispered to Sir Adolphus, for he said :

“I don’t think we’ll have any cards to-night ; they’re so unsociable.”

Now, I wanted, above all things, to draw Will and Sir Adolphus together and allow them to become better acquainted. And Sir Adolphus, I knew, wished to talk to me, for he had begun to ask at dinner whether I thought it would interest Spensworth to see his pictures. I therefore suggested that, if *I* might express a wish, it would be for a little music. Sir Adolphus assented at once and asked one of these rather ambiguous young women to play, while I made room for him on the sofa and beckoned to Will. The Maitland boy—it was *not* very tactful of the Erskines—had been invited for the same week-end, but he was mooning about like a lost soul, looking at the pictures and talking to Lady Erskine. . . .

“You asked me,” I began, “to contrive a meeting—”

“Won’t you wait until this is over?,” suggested Sir Adolphus, with a nod towards the piano.

“I don’t mind it,” I said. “Now, Will

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

has been away at the war since the beginning of 1916. . .” I won’t weary you, but I gave him a little account of my boy’s work on the staff, what were his tastes and ambitions . . . and so on and so forth. I really don’t know what this girl had begun to play, but she must have changed suddenly, for the noise became deafening. . . “I really can’t talk against that,” I protested.

Sir Adolphus went to the piano and whispered something, but the noise only increased.

“And she can’t play against your talking,” shouted Will. “That’s Elsie Creyne, in case you don’t know, and I’ll bet she doesn’t much care about people talking when she’s playing. I’ve been watching her to see what would happen.”

“Then I think, in ordinary kindness, you might have warned me,” I said. “I have no wish to hurt the young woman’s feelings.”

“I thought it might be rather a rag,” was all Will would say. “I’m rather bored with this place. I kept going at dinner because there was plenty of champagne; but, if somebody doesn’t do something, I shall have to brighten things up by pulling old Herr von Erckmann’s leg. He had the cheek to criticize the staff at the end of dinner; I switched the

conversation on to repatriation of aliens, but I haven't done with him yet."

It is this boyish irresponsibility that may be Will's undoing! *Mere* high spirits. . . Before I could utter a word of warning, the music had changed again, every one was dancing and Will had jumped up to join them. I looked on—and marvelled; I had not seen any of these modern dances. And, when I could bear it no longer, I turned my back and began reading a paper. . .

That did in *time* have an effect; or perhaps they merely tired of their revels. But truly honestly, if *I* had not made a protest, *no* one would. Nothing was said, but there was what I can only call an atmosphere of guilt. Then Sir Adolphus discovered that dancing, too, was "unsociable" and enquired whether there was not something that we could *all* do. . .

Goodness me, are we so bankrupt in intelligence that we need to be given childish games to help us kill time? Has conversation died out in England? And you will remember that I was being invited to meet "artists" of every shape and size, who are never so happy as when they are sneering at the uncultured Philistines. These "artists", apparently, unless you encouraged them to dance or gave them rattles, would have sat down and cried. The others—

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

including, I am sorry to say, Will, who was quite carried away by them—walked about saying very loudly “What I want is a drink.” . . .

And I had not had a word alone with Sir Adolphus. . .

“What about Consequences?,” asked some one.

We live and learn, as they say. I have discovered from my experience that week-end that a certain class cannot make a suggestion or ask a question without introducing it with the words “What about.” . . . They put me on my guard now; I feel, when I hear them, that I know where I am. . . But *can* you imagine a greater confession of failure than to propose such a game to fifteen or twenty grown men and women, all—presumably—in possession of their faculties?

“What about Characters?,” asked some one else. “That knocks spots off Consequences.”

I give you their *argot* in all its native elegance. You surely would not have me paint the lily. . .

Before one had time to enquire or protest, one had been set at a table and furnished with a pencil while the rules were explained. A list of qualities, characteristics, whatever you like to call them, was written down; a name was chosen, and we had each of us to award marks.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Thus: you might choose the Prime Minister and set out your qualities—statesmanship, force, honesty, courage, eloquence, amiability, good looks, personal charm and so on and so forth; each of us had ten marks for each quality, and, if you liked, you might give two for statesmanship and four for eloquence and ten for courage; then, when we had all expressed our opinion—it was in secret, and no one saw what marks any one else was allotting—the totals were added and read out. That was the man's "character." . . .

An absurd game! But, as they were too unintelligent to talk and too disobliging to play or sing. . . Will was writing down the questions, and there seems no limit to the number that may be asked.

"And what is to be the first name?" I enquired.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," he said. "You must take the whole lot in turn. Begin with me, if you like."

Then indeed I *had* to make a protest. I had never imagined that we were to play with the names of the people actually in the room at that moment! More *execrable* taste. . . I was only thankful that Will had not proposed so detestable a game and was sorry to see him taking such a lead in it. Personalities of all

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

kinds I abominate; there is a new school of humour which fancies that it has been very clever when people of better breeding would only say that it had been unpardonably rude. Spensworth? Exactly! You could not have chosen a better example. And games of this kind always end in one way. . .

“Surely,” I pleaded, “we need not run the risk of hurting any one’s feelings. If you take people who are known to us all by *reputation*. . .”

“Oh, it’s much more fun this way,” I was assured by Will. “And there’s no need for any one to be offended; all the questions are about *good* qualities—charm and eloquence and so forth. If you think I have no charm, shove down a nought; that’s much better than having ‘Bad temper’ and being given ten marks for it by everybody. I’ll start, anyway, to give you all confidence.”

I *ought* to have resisted more strongly, but I could not let them feel that I was what Will calls a “wet blanket” to everything they proposed. Already they had abandoned cards and interrupted their dancing out of deference to me. . . We began to play, and I confess that I found the game *mercilessly* tiresome. Imagine! A list of thirty or forty questions, which you had to answer fourteen or fifteen

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

times over! Then a pause, while the papers were collected and the marks added; then the totals and a great deal of discussion and laughter and sometimes rather ill-natured facetiousness. And then the whole thing over again!

It would have been wearisome enough if they had played conscientiously; but, when the game was treated as a joke or a means of being malicious in secret, it was sheer waste of time. When my turn came, I was let off with quite a good character; but I am not vain enough to attribute this to anything more than luck or carelessness. I was not one of the *intimates*; they were in a hurry to put down any marks anywhere and move on to their next victim. At the same time I found it *exceedingly* unpleasant when the totals were read out—or, let me say, it *would* have been unpleasant if the whole game had not been so ridiculous. A hundred and fifty marks was the maximum; and, when “Love of Music” was given, I found that I had been accorded—twenty! I, who had been clamouring for music when every one else wanted to gamble or indulge in negro dances. . . And I have no doubt that I am indebted for the *princely* total of twenty to the chivalry of my host and hostess, who could not very well criticize a guest—at least on that score. . . Will? You think that Will came to

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

my support? I do not know what had overtaken him that night; his surroundings reacted on him until he was unrecognizable. When we reached "Sense of Humour", he called out:

"Oh, I say, here's a lark! 'Sense of Humour; grand total, nought.'"

All I can say is, I was glad to have enough humour to see the absurdity and to join in the general laugh. But I was furious with Will. . .

You might have thought that, after I had been pilloried and held up to the scorn of young women whom I would not allow to enter my back-door, artists or no artists, I might have been suffered to go to bed. But no! That would upset the totals! I must stay to the bitter end, though my head was aching with fatigue and I could see that the game was growing more and more ill-natured. . .

I heaved a sigh when we reached Sir Adolf, for his name completed the circle. I don't know whether the others were even trying to give an honest opinion, but I did my best according to my lights. "Good looks"? I really think he would be the first to admit that he is not prepossessing. "Moral character"? I'm not a scandal-monger, I hope, but he *has* been twice divorced. "Loyalty"? I gave him full marks for that; otherwise I should not have

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

been staying in his house. "Hospitality"? He meant well, but a *guest* has *certain* moral claims; I could only give him two for hospitality. "Love of Music"? Five for that, so far as I remember. "Sense of Humour"? *Nought!* I *couldn't* give him any marks for humour. "Amiability"? . . . But I cannot recall the questions; there were nearly forty of them.

I sighed again when Will collected the papers and added the totals. Then came the reading. My dear, I had been led to suppose that what we had written was all in secret, but I *felt* that Sir Adolphus was guessing how we had marked him. "Good looks"? He received nothing for that, not a single mark from the fifteen of us who were eating his food and drinking his wine. "Amiability"? About twenty, obviously given him by his wife and the Maitland boy, who was *very* busy ingratiating himself; or perhaps by one of those ambiguous young women who seemed to be on terms of such extraordinary *freedom* with him. . . "Humour"? Four or five. "Honesty"? Not more than fifteen or twenty. It was too terrible! He tried to laugh it off; but, when he got *no* marks, we were *all* exposed, and I saw him glaring at one after another. And there was one question—"Personal Charm", I think—when Will read out "*Minus ten.*" . . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I *knew* it would happen. There always is some kind of unpleasantness when you begin playing with personalities and taking risks with other people's feelings. I don't think I have *ever* spent a more *distressing* quarter of an hour. Oh, I was thankful when he said:

“Well, so that's what you all think of me, hein? We-ell, what about a drink, what?”

I felt—we *all* felt—that he was really taking it in very good part. . . . The men trooped off to a side-table. I made my way to Will in the hope of whispering just a word. . . . He *had* rather taken the lead in this ridiculous game, and I wished him to be *extra* sweet to the Erskines for the rest of our visit. . . .

“Well, *I* call it rather a frost,” I heard him say, as I drew near. “I'd back ‘Characters’ to break up any house-party in England, but everybody's taken it lying down to-night. . . .”

I was *distressed*, for I really thought we had narrowly escaped some great unpleasantness. And then I found that we had not escaped it after all. Sir Adolphus came up to see that the others were looking after me properly and asked if he might have back the pencil that he had lent me. I surrendered it, he looked at it, pocketed it—and passed on. The others sur-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

rendered theirs, he looked at them. . . Then he came to Will. . .

“I was just wondering,” I heard him say.

“Wondering what?,” asked Will.

“Who gave me *minus* ten for—‘Personal Charm’, wasn’t it? And nought for ‘Loyalty’, nought for ‘Honesty’, nought even for ‘Hospitality’ . . . Just wondering.”

“It’s a secret ballot,” said Will.

“Some one gave me nought for everything except ‘Personal Charm’, and there I received *minus* ten. . . I was wondering who it was.”

“D’you suggest I did it?,” asked Will.

“Oh, I respect the secrecy of the ballot,” answered Sir Adolf. “But I noticed that you were using an indelible-ink pencil and I was clumsy enough to spill some soda-water over some of the papers, including the only one written with an indelible-ink pencil. . . But it is all a game, is it not?”

I have never felt so uncomfortable. Sir Adolphus said nothing more; he and Lady Erskine were *too* sweet for the rest of the time we were at Rock Hill. But I felt—perhaps quite wrongly—that I *could* not place myself under an obligation to him, I could not *invite* a rebuff. . .

Will was in no sense of the word to blame.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

It was entirely my fault for not protesting more vigorously against a game in which there would inevitably be *some* unpleasantness, *some* one's feelings hurt. If we had been treated as rational beings and allowed to talk. . . Or music. I am easily satisfied, I ask for nothing better than a little music. . . If only the rising generation were *rather* less self-conscious. . .

V

LADY ANN SPENWORTH REFUSES TO BECOME A MATCH-MAKER

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion):
If you will give me a moment to set my thoughts in order, I think I can furnish the whole story. Indeed, if you are to skate in safety this week-end at Brackenbury, it is well to know where the ice will bear. . . Goodness me, I don't suggest for a moment that there is anything to *conceal*—I can assure you I should have had something to say before ever receiving the girl or allowing my nephew Culroyd to meet her—my boy Will can take care of himself—; I meant that there is so little to tell. Surdan the name is; Hilda Surdan—and no relation to our dear old admiral, nor to the Lacey-Surdans, nor to that wild, eccentric tribe of Surdans who have spread over so much of Mayo. . . If I may give you a hint, that is just the sort of question that you have so particularly to avoid. I've no doubt that in a few years they will have concocted a most convincing pedigree, linking themselves to all and

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

sundry, but the idea has not occurred to them yet. . .

Homely, unspoiled people I thought them. . . The mother *very* capable, but endearing. . . Immensely rich—I believe it is shipping, but the history books are silent. . . Have you observed a significant change in the biographies of the present day? We are always plunged into the heart of things, as it were: “*called to the bar in seventy-something, under-secretary for this or that, entered the cabinet as secretary for the other and, on retiring, was raised to the peerage with the title of*”—something rather far-fetched and pretentious, as a rule. After that it’s plain sailing. But, if one suggests that even a successful barrister must have had some kind of father and mother, one is considered to have been *tactless*. . . I believe it was shipping. . . They talked a great deal about “yards”, which one always associates with that sort of thing.

I met Mrs. Surdan on one of my committees during the war. When my niece Phyllida was working at that hospital, she befriended the girl—Hilda—; and Mrs. Surdan made this an excuse for introducing herself. I recognized her at once as one of the nameless, efficient women who impose their wills on a committee; earnest and hard-working, but occasionally rather diffi-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

cult, with their assurance and massed information. One feels that there is no subject on which they will not put one right if one has the temerity to open one's mouth. Judge of my surprise when Mrs. Surdan wrote that she would like to come and ask my advice. *My* advice!

"This is your lucky day," said Will, when I shewed him the letter. "Perhaps they want a house in London for the season."

Until that moment I had thought of telling this Mrs. Surdan I was so busy that we must really postpone our meeting. Will's quick brain warned me to do nothing hasty. I don't know whether you *remember* the condition of Mount Street; we had not touched the house, inside or out, since the beginning of the war; and, whenever I spoke to my husband, he put his hands in his pockets and said: "Will you please tell me where the money's coming from?" I'm not going to burden you with my own sordid cares; but we are *not* well-off, and, what with taxation and the rise in prices, Mount Street is rather a responsibility. I retain it because it is my frame and setting; any little *niche* that I may occupy is in Mount Street; and, when I part with the house, you may feel that I have indeed abdicated. This morning my tea was brought me on the tray that the

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

princess gave me as a wedding-present. But you know : the house is a museum of memories. . . But it *is* a responsibility. Arthur's directorships are good so far as they go, but he says there is a reaction against what he calls "figure-head directors". Will is not yet earning anything; and I was cruelly disappointed by Sir Adolphus Erskine when I approached him for an appointment. . . So our income is *not* increasing, and the cost of living *is*. . .

I told Mrs. Surdan that I should be delighted to see her at any time. Arthur saw at *once* the desirability of considering a good offer. . .

"She can have this place for the season," he said, "or for eternity. *With* the plate and linen. *And* the servants. *And Will*, if she'll take him."

When Arthur speaks like that, I never argue with him. It is curious—one has seen the same thing a thousand times between mothers and daughters, but men always pride themselves on being *unpetty*—; Arthur is *really* jealous of his own son. If Will and he are left together for any time, Arthur becomes a different man, querulous, impossible to please. With his directorships and his clubs and his journeys to and fro, my husband—as you must have seen—does not give me very much of his

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

society; I am left to support the burden of domestic empire single-handed, but, when Will is at home, I am *glad* for Arthur to be away. When our boy applied for a commission, all that Arthur would say was, why hadn't he applied for it before? When he joined the staff, why hadn't he *refused* to join the staff? When he left it, why hadn't he *stayed* there? *Picking* a quarrel. . . If only I could find him some suitable employment! But when a man like Erskine or Erckmann or whatever his name is. . . A broken reed, a mere "climber" who hoped to *use* me for securing an invitation to Cheniston and the delectable friendship of my brother-in-law Spenworth. . . I have lost the thread. . .

Ah, yes! For all its shabbiness, the dear old house looked more than attractive when Mrs. Surdan arrived for dinner. Just the two of us. . . I always think tea is such an inhospitable meal, and luncheon is hardly practicable when every gleam of sunlight shews you something more to be patched and painted. . . As a matter of fact I might have spared my pains, for she was not interested in the house.

"Now, Lady Ann," she said, with the brisk, efficient manner which always rather puts me on my guard. "Let's come to business. I want your advice. My husband has closed down

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

his department and is going north immediately. I shall go with him, of course, and I want to know what you would advise me to do with Hilda. After all the work she's done in hospital I should like her to have a few months' complete holiday and to enjoy herself, but obviously I want to entrust her to some one who *will* look after her. Hilda is a thoroughly sensible girl, but London is a big place, and I suppose there is no harm in saying that she is very attractive and will have a good deal of money later on. You know far better than I do the importance of her meeting the *right* people. What do you suggest?"

Now, do you know, I felt so certain what she *wanted* me to suggest that it was on the tip of my tongue to read her one of those abominable advertisements in the morning papers: "*A Lady of Title is willing to chaperon a young girl; introductions. . .*" and so forth and so on. People putting any position they may have up to *auction*! Are you surprised that London is *what* it is? I have always wondered, when I see the really and truly *inexplicable* young women with whom Connie Maitland is *liée* from time to time, whether *she* augments her income in this way. Otherwise I fail to understand how she keeps on that great house in Eaton Place and entertains as she does. But

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

that is *her* business. . . If Mrs. Surdan had dared to propose such a thing, I really think I should have asked her to leave the house. . .

"Surely," I said, "you are the best person to look after Hilda. I go out very little; but, so far as I can judge, there is never any difficulty about getting to know people in London. If you were to take a house in some good neighbourhood and entertain a certain amount—"

"I should only be a handicap to Hilda," she interrupted.

Do you know, I thought that *dear* of her. . . It is the Lancashire "burr", is it not? She had that—not disagreeably, but it was there. And her directness, never rounding the edge of anything she said. . . The girl, you will find, has been polished without being made genteel. If you catch them young, a good school . . . or a governess whose ear has been trained to detect and suppress those tell-tale oddities of speech. . . But you don't often find a mother with the wisdom to recognize that and keep herself out of sight. . .

"I don't know *what* to recommend," I said. "It would be no kindness to ask her to stay here. I am a dull old woman; there are no girls to keep her company; and my husband and I have long found that, in entertaining, it

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

is useless to compete with those who think in pounds when we are forced to think in pennies."

"I should like Hilda to enjoy herself," said Mrs. Surdan. "If some one entertained on her behalf. . . I should like her to be given a ball, for instance. . . But, of course, it wouldn't be fair to ask *you*."

"It wouldn't be fair on Hilda," I said.

"May Hilda's parents not judge of that?," she asked.

A woman with a quite *conquering* smile. . . I wish you had met her.

It was really like a struggle *not* to be first through the door. . .

"If Hilda would *care* to come," I said at length, "as my *guest*. . ."

"I can never thank you enough," said Mrs. Surdan. "She is very tractable. Young, of course. . . And inexperienced about money. . ."

The best method of control, she thought, would be for me to suggest a sum which would cover all her expenses of every kind and for her husband to pay that into my account. . . "Hilda's pocket-money," we agreed to call it. . .

It seemed an admirable arrangement, but then Mrs. Surdan has the *practical* brain of a man in some ways. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I took Arthur completely into my confidence. . .

Will. . .

I had great difficulty in deciding on the right method of approach with Will. State the bald fact that the girl was coming—irrevocably and without appeal; Will might have taken a dislike to her and made my already difficult task harder. Make any mystery about it, and she might have become the fruit of the one forbidden tree, as it were, a sort of morbid craving. And that was the last thing I wanted.

. . . In the end I told him frankly: she was young, pretty and the only child of very rich parents who wanted to launch her on “the great world”, as the literary people call it. . .

“And I expect you to help me,” I told Will. “I don’t *know* the young men of the present day.”

“I must have a look at her before I wish her on to any of my friends,” said Will, not very encouragingly.

You know, there are some people who feel they *owe* themselves a grumble. . . As soon as Hilda arrived, Will behaved charmingly. You have seen her about in London, I expect? Oh, well, she is *really* pretty: small, exquisitely finished, with that “look-you-straight-in-the-eyes” air which so many girls seem to have

acquired during the war. I felt—*pace* her mother—that she was thoroughly well able to take care of herself. Except, perhaps, in dress. The first night she came down in a frock which hardly reached her knees and seemed to stop short at the waist—bare arms, bare shoulders, bare back; I was quite shocked for a moment when Will came into the drawing-room without knocking. . . . However, so long as it did not set him against her. . . . You see, I was simply not equal to taking her out to daily luncheons, dinners, plays, dances; inevitably a good deal devolved on Will, but he was truly sweet about it. . . . Seeing how *répandu* he is. . . .

At the same time, I was in a difficult position, for, while I never *dreamed* he would look at her as a wife, I should have liked him to establish some sort of claim on the girl's father; and, if Will did not marry her, I was not doing much to help the Surdan fortunes. You know what men are! So long as Will was considered her natural protector, the others kept away for fear of "poaching", as it were. I felt it was a pity for them to be about together so much. I'm not ashamed to call myself old-fashioned. . . . And these garish new restaurants and poor Hilda's "uniform undress", as Will rather wittily expressed it, made them very conspicuous. . . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

The girl felt it, too. One day, when he'd devoted half the night to looking after her at a ball, she came to me—in real trouble, I thought—and we had a serious talk. I told her that, if *she* had not spoken, I *should* have; Will was devoting himself to her so good-naturedly that he was neglecting his own prospects and doing nothing to secure an appointment.

“As his mother,” I said, “I cannot bear to see his abilities wasting. . . He needs a *good* appointment; and I don't even know where to *begin* looking for one. But *you* are not to bother your head about *my* affairs. Tell me, dear child, what is troubling *you*.”

So far as I could make out—she spoke very simply and nicely—, she was afraid of getting into a false position with Will if she went about with him so much. *Affichée*. . . At this ball—I had handed on her mother's request that we should be *most* careful whom we introduced—Will had very unselfishly played cavalier the whole evening; and, as she put on her cloak, some girl had asked one of those silly, impertinent questions which do such incalculable harm. . .

“My dear, you must not distress yourself,” I said. “You know the old saying—‘There is safety in numbers’—; for the future. . .”

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

It was quite evident to me *now* that Will did not intend to marry her. He was furious when I even *hinted* at such a thing. . . . And I will tell *you* that I was glad. She would not have made a suitable wife, and no amount of money will overcome those little hardly perceptible angularities of breeding which make the difference between a happy and an unhappy marriage. While there was any possibility of such a thing, I *had* to hold my peace. . . .

That night I improvised quite a big party for her. Will was not able to be present, as he had a long-standing engagement to dine with a man at his club. We had encroached on his time so much that for the first w week of the new *régime* I hardly saw him; he was simply making up arrears with his other friends. I was lucky enough to get hold of Culroyd, however; and, though he was hardly a substitute for Will—I hate to say this about my own nephew, but I always feel that my poor sister-in-law Ruth imported a bucolic strain into the blood—, he did his best and made quite an impression on Hilda. . . .

Indeed, I think you may say that it all started from that night. . . . I *never* imagined that Culroyd would fall a victim. Hilda is undeniably pretty and, of course, she is an heiress; but, beyond that, she brings nothing.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Culroyd is heir to an earldom, and one would have thought he might have done rather better. . . It's not as if he *needed* money. When my brother Brackenbury sacrificed himself for the good of the family, he did it on such a scale that there was no need for any one to follow in his footsteps for several generations. Culroyd and Phyllida, for their age, are very well provided for; and, of course, there is a great deal more to come. No! I could not help feeling that he must have inherited a taste for money with his mother's blood. It is extraordinary how rich people seem to attract rich people. The Jews, for example. . . And *vice versa*. I am sometimes so much afraid that Will may throw himself away on some one whom he'll simply have to support all his life. And, short of selling the roof from over my head and the clothes from off my back, I have done all that I *can* do. . . I have lost the thread. . . .

Ah, yes! Culroyd! I fancy I told you that for a few months my niece Phyllida chose to fancy that she had a grievance against me. A young war-soldier tried to trap her into marriage, glamoured no doubt by the title and a fair presumption of money. If I could feel that I had done *anything* to check a most imprudent alliance, I should be proud of the

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

achievement; I know, however, that I have no right to throw myself bouquets. The young man did not acquit himself well under cross-examination, and you may judge of this "life's passion", as poor Phyllida would like to consider it, by the fact that from that day to this she has never heard from him. The *entire* family held *me* responsible! Hitherto, I had been on the best possible terms with my relations—except, of course, my brother-in-law Spenworth, and that is an honour which I would sooner be spared—; now I was the universal scapegoat. Without yielding in *any* way to cynicism, let me say that I was *amused*, after my Lord Culroyd's first meeting with Hilda Surdan, to find that he did me the honour to make my house his own.

"Let me know some night when he and Hilda are *not* dining here," said Will, when I reproached him for always now deserting us for his club.

For some reason there has never been any great cordiality between the cousins. Perhaps Culroyd is a *little* bit consequential in the way that he insists on his own dignity—a sort of instinctive attitude of self-preservation, as though he realized that he owes everything to an accident of sex and that, if Brackenbury and I changed places, he would have to change

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

places with Will. . . And Will may very well have been galled by the light-hearted way in which Hilda could not get on without him one day and got on quite comfortably without him the next. No one likes ingratitude, though it was on the tip of my tongue to say that he need not grudge his leavings to poor Culroyd.

It was not so easy to find a free night, as the young people seemed to have made arrangements for days ahead, and in the end I told Will to leave them to their whispering and silliness and talk to *me*.

“Why you ever invited her I don’t know,” he grumbled; and I could see that the strain of playing cavalier for so long was telling on him.

“It was an opportunity for doing her a little kindness,” I said.

“And is she going to marry Culroyd?,” he asked, “or is she simply playing with him until she finds something *better* worth her while?”

“Isn’t it rather a question whether Culroyd will marry *her*?,” I suggested. “After all, she doesn’t *bring* very much. . . They seem to get on quite well together.”

“I haven’t seen them,” said Will. “It would be amusing to watch. . .”

When they all met, I can’t say that it was very amusing for *me*. Will can be rather a tease when he likes, but I think it a pity to

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

go on with that sort of thing if other people haven't enough humour to take it in good part. Culroyd and Hilda were so tremendously in earnest that they couldn't bear to be chaffed; and, the stiffer they became, the more irresistible they were to Will. I intervened once or twice, when I thought Culroyd was losing his temper, but the situation seemed to get suddenly out of hand; there was something *very* like a scene.

“If you don't know how to behave,” said Culroyd—very rudely, I thought, “do hire some one to teach you. Your manners would disgrace a privates' canteen.”

“Would they? I'm afraid I'm not a good judge,” said Will.

It was neat; but, though I'm his mother, I feel he ought not to have said it. I expect you know that Culroyd was still at Eton when the war broke out. Brackenbury positively forbade him to take a commission before he was eighteen, so Culroyd ran away and enlisted. It was in the regular army, you understand, and they had every kind of difficulty in getting him out. He joined the Coldstream afterwards, but for a time he *was* a private. . .

“A better judge of draft-dodgers, perhaps,” said Culroyd.

The word was new to me, and I had to ask

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

for enlightenment. When it came, I was *beside* myself with anger. The term is American and applies to a man who "dodges" the "draft", which is their word for conscription. A wickeder or more reckless charge could not be made. Will applied for a commission within the first year and a half of the war. "You can try," I said, "but I *don't* think the doctor will pass you." He did, however, and Will served for three years with great distinction and was quite invaluable to his general. It was the fashion at one time to sneer at the staff, but I have yet to learn that war can be carried on without one; and I sometimes wonder whether the sneers were not mingled with a little *envy* on the part of men who were not efficient enough to be selected.

"Culroyd, you have no business to say that," I told him.

"Will doesn't deny it," he said.

And then I thought my boy shewed both wit and dignity.

"If any one thought it worth while to call me a homicidal maniac," he said, "I doubt if I should bother to deny it."

"They'll never accuse you of even a tendency to homicide—even in war," muttered Culroyd, but he shewed that he had got the worst of it.

I did not like to take Hilda upstairs and leave them a chance of reopening the wrangle; but, when I suggested that we should all go up together, Will remembered that he had promised to meet a man at his club.

“I’m sorry,” said Hilda very nicely, though I felt that I really ought to apologize to her for the little scene. “I wanted to talk to you and him privately. . . . There’s no harm in speaking before you, Lord Culroyd, because you’re one of the family. My father wrote to ask if I knew of any one suitable for a position which is being created in one of his yards—rather a good appointment. He would like to give it to a man who has been in the army, he says. I have the letter upstairs and I remember that the starting salary would be a thousand a year. I think it is the Morecambe yards.” . . .

My dear! . . . I said to myself, “Ann Spensworth, you must keep your head.” For a dozen reasons I wanted to get Will out of London. If Culroyd continued to *haunt* my house, I was thankful to get Will out of the way, though I cannot imagine that this ever entered Hilda’s little love-lorn head. And an *appointment*, when we had waited so long! Besides, London is *not* good for Will’s health. He wakes up *with* a head-ache and *without* an appetite—as a matter of course. . . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I telegraphed as soon as the office opened. Mr. Surdan is a man of business, and the appointment was settled before night. Next day I went up to help find the boy a comfortable home. Don't be shocked now! I am simply echoing Will when I say: "Morecambe is a *God-forsaken* place." Rooms were out of the question, because he must have *some* one to look after him. I was recommended to a worthy old clergyman, when everything else failed; and, though Will protested beforehand, he resigned himself when we reached the house. Just the father, the mother and two daughters, who seemed quite fluttered on meeting Will and hearing who he was. *Quite* pretty girls in a "left-to-run-wild" way. . . Which I, personally, did not mind. After a month of dear Hilda's nakedness it was a comfort to drop into a world where you saw more clothes than *jeune fille*. . . Oh, I don't think Will runs any risk from *them*; he *does* realize that love—in the homely old phrase—doesn't pay the butcher's book; and, after that, one has only to school oneself not to fall in love carelessly. But they will give him pleasant, bright companionship in the long evenings. . .

When I returned to London, Hilda was in bed. 'An internal chill. . . She wouldn't see a doctor, she said, as a few days' rest and warmth

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

were all that she needed. I was not sorry to have a few days' rest too. First Will and then Culroyd. . . I found my little visitor a greater strain than I had anticipated. . . My "rest" was "nothing to write home about", as Will used to say, for I found myself required to cope with a lioness which had been robbed of its cub—Culroyd, I mean. He came as usual expecting to see Hilda—and pretending he *only* wanted to see his poor old aunt! *And* left the moment he had swallowed his coffee! It's a good thing I'm not vain, isn't it? Next day he came again. . . At first it was habit, I think; he had got into the way of meeting this child every day. Then it became more serious. If we are going to bless this union, I think we must also bless Hilda's influenza. (It developed into that. And a nice time I had! Responsible to her mother—and day after day the girl *refused* to see a doctor.) These boys and girls go about together so freely that there is little inducement to bring things to a head, as it were. Goodness me, when I first met Arthur, he would have *liked* to go about with me everywhere, but my dear mother put her foot down very firmly on *that*. And, when he found that it was almost impossible for us to meet, Arthur suddenly discovered that I meant more to him than he had suspected. . . So with Culroyd; history

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

repeating itself, so to say. . . Hilda was a *habit*; and, when the habit was broken by influenza, she developed into a *need*. Culroyd had never taken much trouble before, but now he called every afternoon with flowers and wrote to her morning and evening. She was quite bewildered. A very simple child. . .

When she was well enough to sit up on a sofa, Culroyd fumed with impatience to see her. He insisted on coming upstairs with me, though I told him I wasn't at all sure. . . And so it proved: Hilda said she *really* wasn't equal to meeting any one. The next day she was rather stronger, and I prevailed on her just to let him bring the flowers into her room.

"Aunt Ann, will you leave us alone for one moment?," he asked.

"Really, Culroyd," I said. . . .

Oh, I know it's done, but I was brought up in a different school. All this popping in and out of young people's bedrooms. . .

"Please! I *beg* you!," he said.

And then, before I knew where I was, he had kissed me on both cheeks, tapped at the door and disappeared. . . I went to see about some vases for the flowers; and, when I came back, he was on his knees by the bed and Hilda was stroking his head. My old heart warmed.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

. . . I am not ashamed to confess it. A radiance that you see before young people have time to become hard, worldly. . .

They announced it next day to Brackenbury, though I am sure Hilda was imprudent to travel. Though I could not fairly be saddled with any responsibility, I was a little nervous to see how he would take it; every family has its scapegoat, and at the Hall they have so long found it convenient to dignify me with that position. . .

“Were you surprised?” I asked.

“Well, yes,” Brackenbury admitted. “It was commonly reported that you were keeping Hilda up your sleeve for Will. People told me that it was impossible to walk into a restaurant or theatre without meeting them. You won’t deny that you did rather throw them at each other’s heads?”

“Brackenbury,” I said. “If any one thought it worth while to call me a homicidal maniac, I doubt if I should bother to deny it. . . But are you pleased?”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “They seem quite happy; and that’s all that matters.”

And I preferred to leave it at that. It is not a great match. Ruth, of course, is delighted, because it supports her own conduct in marrying Brackenbury. . . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Even Phyllida had a good word for me—which was so gratifying!

“I hope you’re all as pleased as we are,” she said, with a funny, unsmiling expression. Almost antagonistic. . .

I noticed that she had Hilda’s trick of looking you straight in the eyes—a sort of challenge . . . quite fearless . . . and ready to change in a moment to impudence.

“I am,” I said. “Your uncle Arthur is away and has not been told yet. Will is away too.”

“What’s Will doing?,” she asked.

“He was offered a post at Morecambe,” I told her. “Hilda’s father wanted some one of experience and position, who was used to handling men—”

She seemed to find something to smile at in that.

“What does he get?,” she interrupted.

This absorption in pounds, shillings and pence comes to them *entirely* from their poor mother. . .

“A thousand a year—to start on,” I told her.

“And cheap at the price,” said Phyllida.

I had to beg her to enlighten me.

“Well,” she said, “I don’t call a thousand a year excessive to secure Will—in Morecambe. . .”

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Mrs. Surdan was *naturally* pleased. For them, at least, it is a great match.

“I little thought that it would end like this, when you asked me to take charge of Hilda for three months,” I said.

And that reminded me that what they called “Hilda’s pocket-money” was lying almost untouched at the bank in Arthur’s name. There had been no ball, hardly anything. . . . But I could not get Mrs. Surdan to say what should be done with it. . . .

“I’m sure you didn’t,” she answered.

“So, if it’s a failure, don’t blame me,” I said. “And, if it’s a success, don’t thank me.”

“I shall always thank you for your kindness to Hilda,” she said, “especially when she was ill.”

“That was nothing,” I said.

“Hilda’s parents don’t think so.”

And then she did a difficult thing very gracefully. We must have the girl’s room properly disinfected, she told me; I assured her that Arthur had already received an estimate for redecorating the whole house. Thanks to them, we *were* now in a position. . . . Hilda’s room, she insisted, must be her province. I have told you that in the old committee days she positively *imposed* her will on the rest of us; so now. She would not leave the house until she

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

had dragged the estimate out of me by main force.

The work has recently been completed. There was the usual letter to ask if we were satisfied, and Arthur wrote out a cheque. It was returned. Mr. Surdan had asked to have the account sent to him. . . I was *beside* myself with anger at such a liberty. . .

I tell this against myself, because, having gone to curse, I stayed to pray, as it were. Mrs. Surdan wouldn't let me speak.

"Hilda is our only child, as Mr. Will is yours," she said. "If anything had happened to her, you can imagine what we should have thought. Is it altogether kind to say that we must not thank you for your devotion to our little girl?"

There you have the woman—clever, direct, going *straight* to my weak place. . .

What could one say? . . .

VI

LADY ANN SPENWORTH HOLDS THE *Corps Diplomatique* TO ITS DUTY

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion): I feel—don't you?—that, if the embassies can give no enlightenment, they might just as well not be there. Paris is different, of course; nowadays it is hardly more than a suburb of London; with that vast cosmopolitan army always coming and going, one is hardly expected to be one's brother's keeper. And Washington is unlike any other capital; one goes there *en poste*—or not at all. But in Vienna or Rome. . . Goodness me, in the old days when my father was ambassador, it was a matter of course. When a new star swam into your ken, you made enquiries in the English colony; if not known there *or* at the embassy, a wise woman stayed her hand until she had a *little* something to go on.

In London the *corps diplomatique* is more *diplomatique* than *corps*. Just a swarm of warring atoms, some of them very *charming*, all of them invaluable if a man fails you at the last moment—a word by telephone to the

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Chancery: "Two men; I *must* have them; golf and bridge; the 4.20 from Waterloo; not to bring a servant." . . . And so on and so forth. Indispensable for entertaining on Connie Maitland's lines. They are so nice and tractable; but worse than useless if you go officially, as it were, for a whispered *word* of guidance. As witness Mrs. Sawyer. . .

I cannot remember where I first met her; probably at Lady Maitland's. . . Sooner or later one meets everybody there; and, with all respect to dear Connie, I, personally, should not mind if some of her *protégés* came a little later and left a little sooner . . . before I had time to be involved, I mean. It is all this craze for collecting money and, incidentally, carving a *niche* for oneself as the great organizer. One pictures Connie standing blindfold over a map of England and spearing it ruthlessly with a knitting-needle. "I, Constance Maitland," you can hear her saying, "ordain that *here* and *here* and *here* I will erect hospitals, libraries and wash-houses." . . .

Whether the locality likes it or not, as it were. If the needle pierces Grasmere, so much the worse for Grasmere. It shall have its hospital—in mid-lake, regardless of the *needless* additional expense. I *am* serious about that, because I feel that, if Connie spent more

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

judiciously, she would not have to appeal so persistently; some of us *did* contrive to keep the machine running even before my Lady Maitland descended upon us. . . It does not affect *me* much, because I am never able to contribute more than a trifle; one cannot undertake her new charities indiscriminately without doing an injustice to the old. Others are more happily placed, and my only quarrel with Connie is that I must either drop her or else consent to embrace *all* her new friends. This Mrs. Sawyer, for instance. . .

I forget whether you were in London at the time. . . No, of course not. Well, I can testify to you that her arrival created quite a stir. The *rastaquouère* type is not unknown to me by any means, but I thought Mrs. Sawyer a very favourable specimen. Not more than two or three and twenty, though these South American women reach their prime very early—and pass it; jet-black hair and eyes, dead-white face, scarlet lips, really beautiful teeth; altogether a very striking young woman, with just enough of a foreign accent to give an added charm—for those who like that sort of thing. She had a wistful, mysterious manner which accorded well with the *ensemble* . . . and with the story they told about her. I never heard her maiden name, but I was told at once that she

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

was one of the greatest heiresses in Peru—or it may have been Argentina. This Sawyer was a ne'er-do-well Irishman who had been sent to South America . . . as one *does* have to send these people sometimes; he fascinated her, married her, beat her (I should think) and drank himself to death, leaving her utterly broken-hearted and disillusionized—not with *him* alone, but with the world. . . She had come to Europe to find a new life. Such was the story that Connie Maitland shouted at one; and, if poor Mrs. Sawyer overheard it, so much the worse for her. . .

A romantic setting, do you not agree? If you had seen her come into a room with those great, tragic eyes sweeping face after face as though she were looking for the *one* man who would gather up the fragments of her broken youth. . . If I had been a *man*. . . Superb diamonds, I need *hardly* say; and almost an arrogance of mourning, as though she would *not* be comforted. . . All the young men followed her with their eyes—spell-bound. And some men no longer young. . .

Do you see much of that pathetic class of over-ripe bachelor which my boy rather naughtily calls the “Have-Beens”? They are common, I suppose, to every age and country, but England seems to contain more than her fair

share. Between thirty-five and fifty, not particularly well-connected, not a *parti* among them, not even extravagantly popular, but useful—apparently—and *ubiquitous*. I could give you the names of a dozen. . . Several of them have been in quite good regiments at some time or other. I understand they belong to the usual clubs; most of them dance quite competently; *all* of them play extremely good bridge, I am told. . . Several women I know make out a stop-gap list of them; then, if they're short of a man—it is several grades lower than the embassies, of course, and you are not expected to give even a day's notice—, the butler can telephone to them in turn until he finds one disengaged. Delightfully simple, is it not? Having no personalities of their own, they accord well with every one; having no pride, they never resent an eleventh-hour invitation; they are too discreet to pay unduly marked attention to a married woman, they know their place too well to attempt any intimacy with the girls.

I am not ashamed to confess that I have an old-fashioned prejudice in favour of a man who *is* a man; but the kind I am describing seem to ask nothing more of life than invitations and more invitations—and this strange modern privilege of being “Bunny” and “Chris” and

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“Theo” to women who are old enough to have outgrown such nonsense. If you entertain—I do not, as you are aware—, I believe it is essential to have some such list as I have indicated; and I am told that the men repay you by running errands and being useful in a thousand ways. For *their* sake I hope they never hear what other men say about them, even the fellow-members of their little community—there is no more contemptuous critic of “Bunny” than “Theo”—or what the women say, for that matter. We may, if we are built that way, ask “Bunny” or “Theo” to come and look at frocks with us; but we don’t respect the man who does. . . . If any girl *dared* ask Will to waste a morning, talking to her while she sat for her portrait. . . .

“Bunny” and “Theo” and “Chris” all pricked up their ears when they heard about Mrs. Sawyer. It was another house for them to lunch or dine at; and, of course, they were expected to come to the old houses primed with all the gossip they could pick up about her. I don’t know whether any of them thought *seriously* that they had a chance with her; they must *surely* realize that a woman prefers a man of some spirit. . . . And, if they do, they have no excuse for standing in a ring and keeping every one else away. Of course, they were *useful*

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

to her. Major Blanstock found her a house in South Audley Street and helped her furnish it and found servants for her and so forth and so on. He even introduced her to Connie Maitland—as a short cut to knowing everybody, which I gather was her ambition.

Certainly there is no one to equal Connie for that. You have seen men in the street, unloading bricks from a cart and tossing them, three or four at a time, from one to another? Should Connie ever sustain a reverse, she will always have a second string to her bow. . . Major Blanstock *tossed* this Mrs. Sawyer to Connie, Connie *tossed* her to me. . . I was expected, I presume, to *toss* her on to some one else, but I happen to have been brought up in a different school; before I undertake the responsibility of introducing a complete stranger, I like to know *something* about her. Goodness me, I don't suggest that my recommendation counts for anything, but for my own peace of mind, when somebody says "Oh, I met her at Lady Ann's"—there *is* an implied guarantee—, I want to feel that my friends' confidence is not misplaced.

"Now, Major Blanstock," I said, "I want you to tell me *all* about your lovely young divinity, the rich widow. If I am to befriend her, I must know a *little* about her."

I imagine that I was not the first enquirer,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

for he answered with an impatience which in other days some of us might have considered uncivil.

“*Is she rich?*,” he asked. “I know nothing about her. I don’t even know she’s a widow. I met her on the boat coming home from Buenos Aires; and, as she’d never been in London, I tried to make her feel at home and asked Lady Maitland to give her a helping hand.”

And that was literally all I got out of him—the fountain-head. *Connie* knew nothing and wanted to know nothing. It was enough that Mrs. Sawyer was presentable in herself and would attach her name to *any* subscription-list for *any* amount. The others—people who are usually well-informed—simply handed on the gossip which they had themselves made up overnight. It was then that I approached my diplomatic friends.

The difficulty was to know where to start. I couldn’t commit myself, I felt, by *one* dinner, so when my Will came back. . . . From the north, yes. You knew that he was home? Oh, yes! Well, at the moment he is not doing anything. The Morecambe experiment was *not* a success; the place didn’t suit him, and he didn’t suit the place. That is all I care to say on the subject. Half-truths are always misleading; and I cannot tell you the full story,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

because I do not know it. Should it not be enough to know that for days my spirit was *crucified*? And the end is not yet. . . I have lost the thread. . . Ah, yes. We dined *à trois*: Will and Mrs. Sawyer and I. She was fascinating, magnetic. For the first time Will forgot all about the odious clergyman's odious daughter. . . No, it slipped out. That belongs to the unhappy Morecambe episode, and I really do not think it very kind of you to keep trying to pump me when I have said I prefer not to discuss it. . . When he returned after seeing her home, Will wanted to know all about her, and in such a *way*. . . I mean, if his voice and manner meant anything, they meant that he had met his fate, as it were. I could tell him little. For one thing, I didn't know; for another, his excitement had gone to my head, I saw ten things at once and, breaking through them all, this splendid, untamed creature with the flashing eyes walking side by side with my Will. Such a contrast . . . and *such* a combination. . .

“Well, hadn't you better find out something about her?,” said Will.

I promised to do my best, but one was sent from pillar to post in a quite too ridiculous way. I *thought* some one had told me she came from Buenos Aires (perhaps it was only Major Blan-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

stock's saying he had met her on the boat coming home from there); I tried the Argentine colony and the Legation, only to be referred to the Brazilian Embassy; and there, though I am *sure* they had never heard of her, they were certain that she came from Peru. Until then, I had never realized how many republics there were in South America; I went from Colombia to the Argentine and from Ecuador to Chili. *Invariably* the first question was: "What was her name before she *became* Mrs. Sawyer?" And that, of course, I did not know.

There is such a thing as *trop de zèle*, sometimes hardly distinguishable from making oneself ridiculous. . .

"Surely," I said to Will, "our judgement of this person or that is a better criterion than the bald (and perhaps inaccurate) statement that a person was *born* here and *married* there. Connie Maitland has asked us to shew some little kindness to our friend; and I am not ashamed to confess that it seems *grudging* to insist too much on credentials. In a favourite phrase of your own, Will, she is "good enough" for me; and, if any one says: "I met her at Lady Ann's," I should be tempted to answer: "I hope you do not need a better recommendation."

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“I don’t want to look a fool, that’s all,” said Will.

“My dear boy,” I reassured him, “if she were a complete impostor, does one make a fool of oneself by asking her to dinner once or twice? If so, I am afraid I rank hospitality above my own personal dignity.”

As a matter of fact, it was all the other way. Mrs. Sawyer developed a mania for entertaining. I went gingerly at first, for one had seen so many *rastaquouères* treading that road, but no fault could be found with her methods. Either through Connie Maitland or others, she seemed to know *every one*, and you went to the little *réunions* in South Audley Street with the certainty that, if you did not meet all your friends there, at least every one that you met would be a friend. I enjoyed her parties; indeed, I only hope that she enjoyed them as much as we did, though I confess I sometimes looked at those tragic black eyes and wondered what amusement it could give her.

Stay! There was *one* blot: her hospitality left one no opportunity of making an adequate return. Where there is a marked difference of means, I am the last to suggest that one should proceed on the principle of “a cutlet for a cutlet and a quail for a quail”, but it is uncomfortable to feel that everything is coming

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

from one side. My *own* conscience is clear, for we had done our part; Mrs. Sawyer had in fact dined with us once in Mount Street—just Will and me; I am not in a position to entertain in the old sense of the word—, we had asked her again at least once, and she had never been able to come. It was always: “Oh, won’t *you* come to *me*? And whom shall I ask to meet you? And would you prefer just to dine or shall we go to a play?” All in that charming almost-broken English of hers. It would have been ungracious to refuse. . .

I confess that I never saw and do not see to this day how some of the “Have-Beens” justified their existence. I mean, Will and I dined or lunched or went to a play with her three and four times a week, *simply* because Major Blanstock told us that she was alone in London and Connie Maitland had asked me to look after her. I can assure you, we *never* went to South Audley Street without finding a little cluster of “Bunnies” and “Theos” and the rest.

I tackled one of them about it. . . This is between ourselves, but it was Mr. Gorleigh—“Reggie” Gorleigh, I suppose I should call him, to be in the fashion.

“You seem a *great* friend of Mrs. Sawyer,” I said. “I am always meeting you here. Tell

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

me; I don't know how long she is staying in London, but one would like her to take away a pleasant memory of such hospitality as one can shew her. Is there anything we can do to make a little return? I hardly like to go on taking with both hands."

"Well, I felt that from the first," said Mr. Gorleigh. "Geordie Blanstock introduced me, and I came here once or twice. . . Then I felt . . . as you do; and I cried off. The only thing is, she *hasn't* many friends, and I thought it wasn't quite fair, perhaps, to stay away out of a sort of false delicacy. The poor little woman *wants* companionship."

"Your feelings do you credit," I said as gravely as I could.

Really, it would have been laughable if it had not been so disgusting. A man who lives by sponging on his friends for free meals to pretend that he was coming, against his will, to give "the poor little woman" the inestimable privilege of feeding him. . . But, if you please, that was the accepted "eye-wash", as my boy would call it. In a spirit of pure mischief, I am afraid, I went from one to another: "Bat" Shenstone, "Laurie" Forman, "Theo" Standish, "Bunny" Fancroft. Always the same story! *They* didn't come to the house for what they could get out of it; I must understand

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

that they were Mrs. Sawyer's *friends*. Hoity-toity! Friends with a capital "F". . .

Very soon it was "Consuelo's" friends. Looking back on it all, one seems to hear a series of commands: "on the word 'loot', quick march; on reaching South Audley Street, halt and enter; on the word 'love' . . ." and so forth and so on. No, it's not mine; Will drew a most amusing picture. . . But that is literally what happened: first of all, they were "Consuelo's" *friends*, then they were all in love with her.

I have suggested that men of that stamp are incapable of being serious about anything—except the next meal; but any one who was genuinely fond of the poor woman could not help seeing that this formal persecution was more than a joke. Will came to me after one of her parties and said that it was high time for us to *do* something.

"Get her *away* from all that gang," he cried; and from the agitation of his voice I could see that he was taking this to heart.

And, you know, it was rather dreadful to see that lovely creature with the tragic eyes standing like a bewildered child with all these young-old men baying round her. . .

"It's easier said than done," I told him.

"Uncle Tom Brackenbury's going north

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

for the Twelfth," said Will. "Get him to lend you the Hall and ask Consuelo down."

My brother, as you know, is of so curious a temper that I have always been more than chary of even seeming to put myself under an obligation to him. One had the feeling, don't you know, that, if *he* did not place a wrong construction on one's request, my niece Phyllida *would*. . . Since Culroyd's engagement, however, poor Aunt Ann's shoulders have been relieved a little of their burden; the family persists in thinking that I contributed to bring it about, whereas I rigidly set my face against any planning of that kind and was only responsible to the extent that Hilda Surdan was staying in my house when my nephew Culroyd met her. . . The point of importance, however, is that Aunt Ann is now embarrassingly popular. Brackenbury lent me the house almost before I asked for it. . .

Then I had to think how the invitation might be made most attractive to Consuelo. After the *excitement* of her life in London, undoubtedly the best thing would have been to give her all the rest and quiet that we could. There is, however, a strain of something restless and untamed about her; one pictures her running bare-foot through the woods or plunging into the surf by moonlight; and, though she

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

would overcome that in time, I could not conceal from myself that, on the one occasion when she had dined with us *en famille*, she had flagged. . . I told her that I hoped to secure some of our common friends; and Will and I worked hard to arrange relays of the people who would best accord, so to say. . .

I started with Major Blanstock, as he seemed her oldest friend. To do him justice, after the first meeting at Connie Maitland's house, I had never seen him with the jackals; he didn't pretend to be in love with her, he didn't talk about the pearls of his friendship and he didn't even refer to her as "Consuelo".

"I shall be delighted to come, if I can get away," he said.

"Your fascinating young widow is coming," I said, as a bait—though I felt that he had long ago lost interest in her.

"My widow?," he repeated. "I am alive—and unmarried, Lady Ann."

"Silly man! Our Brazilian heiress," I explained.

"Oh! Mrs. Sawyer," he said. "Is she Brazilian? I didn't know that. But it's not fair to embarrass her with my friendship. She is almost a stranger to me; I don't know that she's an heiress, I don't even know that she's a widow."

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“But,” I said, “surely her husband drank himself to death.”

“Some one told me that he *drank*,” said Major Blainstock. “Whether he drank himself to death I can’t tell you. I didn’t feel it was my affair. . .”

I forget whether any one was with us at the time, but this story spread. . . At least, it wasn’t a *story*; several people, knowing nothing of the facts, had chosen to assume that a certain woman was a widow; one man, equally knowing nothing, said that he did not know whether she was a widow or not. Goodness me! Did it matter two pins one way or the other, so far as *we* were concerned? I should have been sorry to find out afterwards that there had been any kind of scandal, because one had thrown one’s mantle over the woman and given an implied guarantee, as it were. That was why I *did* attempt to learn a little something from my diplomatic friends. . . But it is hardly too much to say that a panic ensued among the “Bunnies” and “Theos”.

“They tell me,” said Mr. “Bat” Shensstone, “that Mrs. Sawyer’s husband is still living.”

“Oh?,” I said. That phrase—“They tell me”—! It always puts me on my guard.

I nearly told *him* that, if he was only a *friend*

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

to her, it did not matter whether she had a husband or not. . . I noticed that she was "Mrs. Sawyer" now. . .

The stories that I met for the next few days were so fantastic that I really think some one must have been deliberately making them up. At one moment the husband was in a home for inebriates, at another he was alive and well with a formidable revolver ready for any one who became too "friendly" with his wife; at another he was supposed to be in prison for actually shooting a man; then she was said to have divorced him, then he was said to have divorced her. Finally I was assured that she had never had a husband and was an adventuress who had come to exploit London. The money, I was told, was a decoy, and in reality there was no money; she had been left a few thousands by some man with whom she had been living; and she was pouring it out right and left in the hope of ensnaring some one else before it was all spent.

I really did not know what I should be required to believe next.

"We must clear this up," said Will one night when we were all down at the Hall.

"Which story in particular?" I asked.

"All of them," he answered very decisively; "and at once. I'm not thinking of *us*, but we

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

can't afford to let Consuelo have these lies circulating about her. Why don't you talk to her and find out the truth?"

I am not ashamed to confess that I rather shrank from the prospect. Mrs. Sawyer had always been so singularly uncommunicative that it seemed impertinence to peer behind the veil. And the more so when she was one's guest. I don't think I could have screwed up courage, if Will's forethought had not shewn me the way; but I *did* tell her as gently and sweetly as I could that there was always a certain idle curiosity about foreigners who came to live in England and that, in her case, the curiosity was increased by her beauty and immediate success. I coaxed her to tell me a little about her life. . .

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

Those great black eyes—how I wish you had seen her!—became cold as stone. I was *frightened*. . .

"Your husband. . ." I began.

"He is dead."

Truly honestly, do you know, I couldn't go on. I *did* find out that he had been dead eighteen months and they had been married for less than a year and there were no children. That, at least, was her story; one had no opportunity of testing it or catching her out . . . even if one had wanted to. *Who* she was

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

before, *where* the money came from, *if* there was any money—not a word! To this day I don't know whether she hailed from Paraguay or Venezuela. . . .

“She is a widow,” I was able to tell Will; and indeed I took great pains to scotch these ridiculous stories which had been swirling round London when I left. It was cruel that any one should say such things of *any* woman; and, if my boy ever thought fit to drop the handkerchief, I did not want to have any explaining-away to do. She was greatly attracted to him, and I fancy that the one doubt in his mind was the immense difference in blood and breeding: Roman Catholic (I presume; I have no certain knowledge even of that) and Anglican, Latin and Anglo-Saxon . . . and so forth and so on. We really knew so very little about her that my boy prudently and properly did not seek to press his advantage with her prematurely. . . .

I sometimes feel that in London one uproots one lie only to make room for another. A few days' “propaganda”, as Will would say, convinced people that “the mystery woman”, as some one christened her, had no homicidal husband lurking with a revolver behind the nearest bush. But a different story became wide-spread . . . indeed, universally repeated and almost universally believed. The old story, I should

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

say, was revived. People said that she had come over with a few thousands and had spent every penny of it.

“I have no more knowledge than you have,” said Major Blanstock, when I tackled him about it one day at Brackenbury; and then he added with rather a tiresome assumption of virtue: “I didn’t feel it was my affair.”

“But you’re her friend,” I said.

“If she gives me an opportunity of proving it.”

“And in some ways her sponsor,” I said.

“Oh, I would stand sponsor for her at all times,” he answered. “If your story is true, she will have an opportunity of proving the quality of all her friends.”

And there the thing ended, so far as we were concerned. Brackenbury had lent us the house for two months; but, when Consuelo left us after a fortnight, we were not sorry to return the following day to London. I was in terror that Will might commit himself before we had really found out anything; but, the moment these stories began circulating again, he very wisely retired into his shell; I suppose it was because she felt that no progress was being made that Consuelo curtailed her visit. Or, perhaps, with that restlessness of hers, she was simply bored; *my* feelings would not suffer if she told me that

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

one dull old woman. . . I should explain that our scheme of house-parties broke down; the women, indeed, came, but man after man failed us at the last moment. One spent Friday morning despatching one's staff in turn to the telephone with names and more names and yet *more* names. . .

I found it hard to believe that *all* the "Bunnies" and "Theos" were in such request, but no enlightenment was vouchsafed until our return to Mount Street. If there had been a panic when we left London, the phrase *sauve-qui-peut* is hardly too strong for the condition we found awaiting us. Some one had industriously spread this story that Mrs. Sawyer was a mere adventuress, and everybody was anxiously disclaiming all acquaintance with her. I have suggested that for months it was impossible to enter South Audley Street without running into Mr. "Reggie" Gorleigh; with my own ears I heard him say: "Mrs. Sawyer? Oh, that South American woman! I *think* I know who you mean."

For sheer audacity. . .

"I don't know what else you would expect," said Major Blanstock one day. "People in London will take anything from anybody—and go on taking it so long as they think there's money about. If you whisper that they may

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

afterwards have to make a return, they vanish into thin air. I know nothing of Mrs. Sawyer's affairs; but, if it's true that she *has* lost all her money, I should have thought that her friends would have rallied round her and shewn that it made no difference. On a strict calculation of one meal against another, they could keep her from starving for a year or two."

"And so I have no doubt they will," I said, though I detest all this modern weighing and balancing.

Where calculation comes in, hospitality goes out.

"She's absolutely deserted!", he cried. "I know, because I'm the only man who goes near her."

"That, Major Blanstock," I said rather sharply, "is neither fair nor true. Consuelo spent a fortnight with *us*, she was invited to stay longer."

"But would you ask her again?," he sneered; and I could see that he was most offensively hinting that we, like the rest, had dropped her when the bubble was pricked.

"My brother has unfortunately resumed possession of Brackenbury," I told him.

And then I really had to pretend that there was somebody at the other end of the room who wanted to speak to me. . . I hope I am tolerably

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

good-tempered, but I will not allow every one to make himself a ruler and a judge. . .

All through the summer it had been "Mrs. Sawyer this" and "Mrs. Sawyer that". *Dear Consuelo* was so charming, her parties were so delightful. If one did not know her, one must take steps to become acquainted. And so forth and so on. . . In the autumn there was what I can only describe as a *guilty silence*; it was in questionable taste to mention her; she dropped out completely, and one almost begged one's man *not* to bring the car home by way of South Audley Street. Every one seemed to fear that she might present herself any day at the door and claim to be taken in and supported by those who had only accepted her too lavish hospitality because they were "friends" and a little sorry for her lonely state. Then came the great surprise. . .

It can only have been a surprise to people who had *jumped* to conclusions without troubling to collect a *shred* of evidence. . . I purposely kept my mind a blank. . . There were rumours; and then one read the announcement—that she was marrying this Major Blanstock. I believe she is a great heiress, I believe her husband *did* drink himself to death. And I still believe, as I always believed, that she is a thoroughly nice, very unhappy woman. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

She would never have done for Will. . . As you would be the first to agree, if you had seen her. Oh, I can't describe my relief that nothing came of *that*. The difference of blood and breeding—Roman Catholic and Anglican, Latin and Anglo-Saxon. . .

But I feel that the poor woman would have been given a fairer chance if her own people at the Legation had been able to tell us something about her. If they can't do that, I really don't know what they are there for or why one takes the trouble to invite them to one's house. . .

VII

LADY ANN SPENWORTH DEPLORES PROPOSALS BY WOMEN

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion):
Oh, but I fully believe they do it! There were rumours even before the war. To my mind, the idea that *any* girl should ask a man to marry her is so repugnant that I can hardly think of it calmly. All so-called "Leap-Year jokes" seem to me to be in execrable taste. . . *Since* the war, with these millions of superfluous women, I am told that it has become quite common. You have always had the cranks who claimed that a woman had as much right to choose a husband as a husband to choose a wife; and now girls like my niece Phyllida say that, with the general upset of war, a little money frightens a man away and, if you want him to see that a difference of means is not a real obstacle, you have to take the first step. I'm inclined to say: "Rubbish, child, rubbish"—and *again* "Rubbish". Since when have young men developed these fantastic scruples? And does any girl think that the only way of securing a man is to propose to him? I should have *imagined*. . . But I was brought up in a different school. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Phyllida, of course, was struggling with her obsession. I do feel Brackenbury incurred a responsibility in not sending her *right* away. Ever since Colonel Butler disappeared, she has alternately fumed and fretted. Now she is becoming hard and cynical; if she were ten years older, you would call her "soured". Ridiculous at one-and-twenty, or whatever she is. . . And she became no more normal after giving up hope of him. Oh, yes, I'm thankful to say that I think all that is *quite* over, though we must expect to see an occasional relapse; hence the discussion. She said that, if she met her Hilary or ever found out where he was, she would throw herself into his arms and ask him to marry her. And *sotto voce* the customary hateful suggestion that I had taunted him with wanting to marry her for her money and so driven him away in order to clear the ground for my Will. It is always on the tip of my tongue to say that she seems very certain of my boy. But it is the modern fashion for a girl to think she has only to drop the handkerchief. . . Brackenbury patted her hand (if he had slapped her it would have been more to the point), I went on with my work. She wanted the stimulus of a little opposition, and that was just what I refused to give her. Then she began talking in general terms about the difficulty that a girl has

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

in finding a husband nowadays : fewer men than ever, all of them uprooted by the war and uncertain of their future, widows marrying again, the older women remaining young so much longer. I felt that, to some extent, it was all true, but I was surprised to hear such truths on Phyllida's lips if she still wanted me to think she was faithful to Colonel Butler's memory. . .

Culroyd's marriage made a difference, of course. He was a devoted brother, according to his lights ; and I think she is missing him greatly. And one wedding, like one funeral, leads to another. *You* have seen it again and again ! The *trousseau*, the presents, the letters, the general excitement, the very contagion of two young lovers. . . All this coming at a time when she seemed *deliberately* to be making herself as unhappy as possible. . . I knew there would be a strong reaction, I was only afraid that she might throw herself at my Will's head and that he might be unable to say " no ". I kept him away from the Hall as much as I could. If he *really* wanted her, he could drop the handkerchief—I felt—in his own good time. . .

" Your turn will come," I told her.

" Oh, I don't care who I marry," she answered. " I suppose I shall need a home when I'm turned out of here ; and, if so, I'd better get to work while I'm still young enough to

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

attract men. I'm open to any offer; the man mustn't be *too* hopeless a cad, that's all."

This mock-desperation would have been very cynical if it had not been so unconvincing. I said nothing at the time; but, when I had a moment alone with her poor mother, I *did* feel it my duty to say candidly that it was time somebody did *something* to change the girl's thoughts. Ruth agreed, but in a helpless, hopeless way that always makes me wonder how Brackenbury has put up with her for so many years. In her opinion, Phyllida was pining for her young soldier and would continue to pine, so far as I could gather, until she found him.

"Is it not better," I asked, "to face facts? Colonel Butler was certainly attracted, but he realized in time that he had hardly the means or the position to qualify him as husband to Phyllida and son-in-law to Brackenbury. Very properly he made himself scarce; and nothing in life became him so well as his leaving of it. You say he has not written? He won't write;—and I respect him for it. But, goodness me, I hope you're not going to encourage Phyllida to think that she's broken her heart in a hopeless passion. If you won't send her *right* away (as, you will have the justice to remember, I felt it my duty to suggest at the outset), let her come

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

to me for a few weeks and let me see if London can't provide something to turn her thoughts."

The trouble *was*, if you will promise not to tell any one I said so, that Phyllida's *vanity* was hurt. When she was running after this young man, there was so much publicity that people began to wonder; they became spied on and whispered about; when he was summoned to Brackenbury, every one felt that *now* they were going to make certain of him; when he left before his time, without saying a *word* to her, it was naturally assumed that he had run away. Rather than believe that any man could weary of her charms, Phyllida will convince herself that I turned young Butler against her. . . Hence this terrible bitterness. . .

If you ask me whether I expected to have my offer accepted, I will frankly say "no". I think Phyllida must enjoy surprises, for she accepted the invitation at once, though perhaps a little ungraciously and with a suggestion that, within limits, any one was welcome to her. . . Will was at home; and, though I have never been able to decide what I should think if he told me that he was going to marry his cousin, I was certainly beginning to feel that it was time for him to find a suitable wife and settle down. Will is nearly thirty, and I have always considered that a popular and good-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

looking bachelor is *unfairly* exposed to temptation in England. *They* will let well alone if only others would leave *them* alone. . .

As witness that girl at Morecambe. I shall not tell you about that, because I hope—nay more; I *pray*—that it is all satisfactorily settled; and, also, I was never told the full story. It was enough for me that he had lost a splendid appointment and now, once more, has *nothing* to live on; he must marry or find a job. . . When the girl's father came to the house—one of these rugged, north-of-England clergymen who always have the air of intimidating you into a state of grace—, it was my husband whom he insisted on seeing. I had never known Arthur in a state of such ungovernable fury. Bursting into my room, he stamped up and down, incoherent, beside himself. . . To this day I do not know what Will is supposed to have done. The girl kissed him good-night or something. I suppose I am the last person to condone any *freedom*, but she was a mere child ten years younger than my boy—what more natural or innocent? The old father spied on them. . . Hence the storm. Reading between the lines, I should conjecture that the girl deliberately laid herself out to catch Will. The one time I saw this Molly Phenton, she seemed an attractive child, with deep-set, rather appealing eyes;

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

a good deal of soft brown hair, too, and pretty hands. Quiet, simply dressed; a perfect specimen of "the old country clergyman's pretty little daughter." And that, *I have no doubt*, was the effect she wanted to achieve with Will, the appeal of innocence and youth to a palate grown weary of more sophisticated charms; I wonder *more* men are not caught in that way. . . Will, I am thankful to say, pulled back before the trap could close on him; I was really astounded that the father had the effrontery to come all the way from Morecambe on what was nothing less or more than a blackmailing expedition. Futile, if nothing else; Will is not one of those men who find it necessary to buy popularity by giving presents to all and sundry; and I am sure he is too prudent to write a girl foolish letters. . .

"Arthur, do stop walking about," I said, "and tell me what has happened."

Too often, *only* too often, when Will has been in trouble of any kind, I have been excluded on the pretext that this was not a woman's province. His own mother!

"What has happened?," he shouted. "Why, we have brought into this world as choice a young blackguard as any one is ever likely to meet. Phenton told me so to my face; and I had to agree with him. He said he wished

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

he were young enough to horse-whip the fellow; I said I agreed. He wished the girl had a brother to do it; I said again that I agreed."

I really thought it best to let him wear himself out. . . . When a man speaks in that tone about his own son, when a Christian minister talks about horse-whipping people. . . . All these wild words made rather less than *no* impression on me, as I was quite sure that my boy hadn't written anything that could be used against him.

"And what is the outcome of it all?," I ventured to ask, when the storm had abated.

"The outcome?" When Arthur is moved, he has a most irritating trick of repeating one's words. For thirty years I have tried to break him of it, but he is obdurate. "You'd better find some woman who'll marry the young scamp and keep him in order. The sooner the better. And I wish her joy of him."

When Will returned to Mount Street—he lived at his club until the wild clergyman returned to Morecambe—, I begged for enlightenment, but he would say nothing. For that, I am not ashamed to confess, I respected him; however badly this Molly Phenton (or "Molly Wanton," as *I* prefer to call her) had behaved, Will was too chivalrous to clear himself at the expense of a woman—and this though I could see that he was worried out of his mind.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

To a man, *that* is a law of the Medes and Persians. . .

“Son of mine, you must try to forget the whole thing,” I said. “When you are older, I am afraid that some of your ideals will be modified; in future, no doubt, you will be more on your guard; but you will never be secure until you are yourself married.”

“Oh, I’m open to any offer,” said Will, exactly as poor Phyllida had done.

I was disquieted, for I could see clearly that he would indeed never feel secure from this girl until he was plighted to another woman. When once a man is “Morning-Posted”, as he would say, all other fancied claims dissolve into thin air. . . The mere sight of the Morecambe post-mark in those days sent my heart into my mouth, and I could see that the strain of this persecution was telling on his nerves. “Ann Spenworth,” I said to myself, “you must make up your mind; if he wants to marry Phyllida, you must not stand in the way.” . . .

All my life I have shrunk from the responsibility of interfering with the destiny of a boy and girl in love. The relationship is too delicate, the consequences are too grave. Before Phyllida came, I reviewed the position and decided to make no change.

“Your cousin,” I told Will, “is coming to

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

us for a few weeks, and I wish her to carry back pleasant memories of her visit. It is no secret to you that she has been disappointed through fancying herself in love with a man who could never have been a suitable husband for the Earl of Brackenbury's daughter. We have to be kind to her; and, if I know anything of girls, you will find that one who for the moment feels forlorn and uncared-for will repay the affection of him who can overcome her sense of loneliness and convince her that the whole world is not indifferent to her happiness. The labour and heat of the day," I said, "must inevitably fall on you. I cannot hope that your cousin will be amused by the society of a dull old woman like me; and I am unequal to the physical strain of accompanying her to dances and plays. If you will relieve me of this burden, you will be doing us both a kindness; and, though I cannot hope to repay you, I should like you to feel that you may draw on me for any expenses to which you may be put in the course of keeping her amused."

Some people—especially the *really* good-natured—feel that they owe themselves a grumble before ever consenting to do a kind act. Will is like that; unless you knew him well, you might think that he made difficulties before putting himself out in the slightest

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

degree, but on this occasion he promised without demur. Perhaps he hoped that in playing cavalier to Phyllida he would turn his own thoughts from that unhappy episode at Morecambe; I prefer to think that, having now suffered himself, he was more sensitive to others' suffering. . . I did not enquire how they spent their time; they were cousins and could go about together without being spied on and whispered about; I made over the car to them, kept Will supplied with little sums to cover their amusements and asked no questions.

From start to finish, he behaved splendidly. I am not being unkind if I say that Phyllida was sometimes a little *difficile*. . . You have noticed, I expect, that, when people of a certain class become possessed of a motor-car for the first time, their ambition is to see how fast they can drive it. Phyllida, I am afraid—and I was sorry to see it, though I could hardly hope for any other fruit of poor Ruth's upbringing; you may copy the mannerisms of others, but you can only give forth the breeding that is in you. . . I have lost the thread. . . Ah, yes! Phyllida, I am afraid, seeing a loyal and attentive cavalier always by her side. . . She tried my Will very hard; I sometimes felt that she was deliberately experimenting to see how much he would bear. Among places of amusement it was always *her*,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

choice that prevailed; Will has a weakness for these *revues*—"you can at least smoke there," he says—; Phyllida seemed to have developed into a remorseless blue-stocking. By day she wore him out at exhibitions. . . . When he was not cooling his heels in a shop. . . . At night he was expected to stay up till all hours to bring her home from dances. And so forth and so on. . . .

Perhaps she tried us all rather hard. Money seemed to *melt* in her hands; and, though I did not grudge her my last penny if it was going to turn her thoughts, I am not ashamed to confess that I have reached an age where I set great store by my personal comfort. When you have lived for thirty years under the same vine and fig-tree, you begin to regard your home as a frame and setting which you are not too anxious to share with any one; hitherto my guests, when any have done me the honour to make my house their own, have recognized that the hostess *has* the first claim on their consideration. Not so Phyllida, who seems to have been brought up in a very different school. She was *ruthless* in her unpunctuality at meals and in her general disregard of every one else's convenience; plans were chopped and changed up to the last moment, and there were times when I felt that she was deliberately making every-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

thing as difficult as possible—almost as though the absurd old feud had not been forgotten and I had put myself at her mercy. More than anything else I felt the loss of the car. They used it so unmercifully that I hourly expected the man to give notice; and in the meantime poor Aunt Ann was left to go by taxi—when she could find one.

I ought never to have lent it? My dear, you are preaching to the converted, but I have a reason different from yours. I was standing helplessly outside Covent Garden one night, when a taxi providentially drove up and I got into it. Only when I was half-way home did I remember that I had not told the man where to take me. Laugh, if you will; but I have *never* been so frightened! The wildest stories of kidnapping and robbery surged into my head. I was wearing my tiara, and the man had made a bee-line for me. . . Yet we were driving the shortest way to Mount Street, and the mystery was not explained until the man—with delightful and most unexpected civility—jumped down from the box, opened the door and stood cap in hand, waiting to help me out. Almost as though one had been Royalty. . .

“You have forgotten me, Lady Ann?,” he asked.

And then I'm not sure that the second

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

shock wasn't worse than the first. Colonel Butler! Phyllida's soldier-hero, driving a cab! He had won a Military Cross and a D.S.O.—with a bar, I believe; he had always seemed a manly, straightforward young fellow—and here he was driving a cab! “This—*this*—” I felt myself apostrophizing Phyllida, Brackenbury, that poor fool Ruth—“this is what I've saved you from.” . . . And then one had a certain revulsion of feeling: the pity of it! . . . And then stark horror! If Phyllida met him! Not *then*; I knew she was at a dance with Will and would not be back for hours, but at any moment when I was not there to protect her from herself. I recalled her dreadful threat that, if she saw or heard of Hilary Butler, she would fling herself into his arms and beg him to marry her. . . .

“But—of course I remember you,” I said.

He smiled—without embarrassment of any kind—and walked up the steps with me.

“Have you a key?,” he asked, “or shall I ring?”

He *spoke* so nicely. . . . If you like, just a touch of what I think must be West Country; but, when things were at their worst and I felt that we had to be prepared for anything, it was a slight consolation to know that he could easily have it drilled out of him. . . . I could

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

have done the same for Ruth twenty-three years ago, but she seemed to pride herself on her provincialism.

Now I wonder what you would have done. . . . When Phyllida was nursing him at the hospital—or just afterwards—, he was *always* in Mount Street, lunching, dining; before they took to going about by themselves *quite* so much, we had all been to the play, he had seen us home—just like this—and asked me—just like this—whether I had my key or whether he should ring. . . . There was no one at home; even Arthur was in the country. I felt I *couldn't* suddenly freeze. . . .

“I have my key, thanks,” I said. “Won't you come in for a moment?”

He stopped his engine and came in. . . . Now, I wonder what you would have done, if you'd been in *his* place? . . . He took off coat and gloves (he was wearing quite a presentable blue suit underneath), and I led the way into the morning-room, where I offered him cigarettes and something to drink . . . wondering the whole time, don't you know, why one had *done* it and how long he would stay. . . . *With* the coat and cap he seemed to divest himself of what I can only call the professional manner; asked me if I wouldn't have a little of my own brandy, commented on some new

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

curtains I'd bought when we did up the house after Hilda Culroyd's illness. *Absolutely* at home. . .

"How is Phyllida?," he asked.

"My niece is very well, thank you," I answered, hardly caring—at that moment—to notice the familiarity. "And what have *you* been doing with yourself since last we met?," I made haste to ask.

"Oh, as you see," he said, "I've turned taxi-man. Owner-driver. One in action, four in support and nine training."

I had to beg for enlightenment. And I am not ashamed to confess that his explanation, when it came, greatly increased my respect for him. The father, one gathered, was an estate-agent and surveyor in Devonshire, *highly* esteemed, but neither a millionaire himself nor in a position to make his son a millionaire simply by wishing it. The boy had realized everything—war-bonus, wound-gratuity and the rest—and had invested in a car which he learned to drive himself. One always *suspected* that here was a fortune for any young man who was not too proud to take off his coat, and so it proved: the one car became two, the two four and five—hence his expression "one in action and four in support." Now, I was given to understand, he was launching out more widely and nego-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

tiating for the purchase of *nine* more. A few of his friends—young fellows like himself discharged from the army—were coming into partnership with him; and in six months he hoped to give up driving himself and to turn his business into a limited company, partly taxis and partly those really magnificent private cars that one sees at the opera and everywhere, filled by people who one *knows* could not afford to buy such things at the present prices. . . .

I complimented him *most warmly* on his enterprise and determination.

“It was so obvious,” he answered. “Stand outside any theatre or restaurant on a wet night, and you’ll agree with me. There are thousands of people *living* in London, *hundreds* of thousands coming to London for a few nights, who need a car and can’t afford to keep one. By the time you’ve ordered dinner at fifteen shillings a head and champagne at two guineas a bottle and brandy at five shillings a glass and cigars at four shillings a-piece and stalls at twelve and six and anything else that occurs to you at any price that occurs to any one else, you don’t grudge an extra guinea for a car that takes you from your house to the restaurant, from the restaurant to the theatre and from the theatre home again. You’d spend the best part of a guinea in fares and tips—without any certainty.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

For *two guineas* I give you certainty and a private car. In two years no one who can afford to dine at Claridge's or go to the stalls will *dream* of going any other way. Whether it pays you can judge from the progress I've made in less than a year."

Like all enthusiasts on their own hobby, he *deluged* me with figures until my poor head reeled. I did not complain, however, because I felt that so long as he was doing sensible hard work he would be unlikely to return and disturb our peace of mind. Apart from the one formal question he had not mentioned Phyllida; and I was strengthened in the belief which I had always held that it was a momentary infatuation and that he proved he had overcome it when he declined to communicate with her.

I *hope* I did nothing to suggest that one can have too much even of percentages and running expenses and allowances for depreciation and the like, but he jumped up suddenly and said:

"Well, I mustn't keep you and I mustn't be late for my next job. I hope your brother and Lady Brackenbury are all right? I see Culroyd is married."

"They are all very well," I said, as I walked with him to the door.

"If I may ask a favour, Lady Ann,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

don't tell any of them what I'm doing," he begged.

Do you know, that was the only jarring note. . . The first recognition, of course, was a *shock*. "D.S.O. Taxi-driver," don't you know? In some strange way it *grates*. . . Having *taken* the plunge, our young friend, I felt, was entitled to the highest credit, and anything like false shame would have been discordant.

"They would be the first," I said, "to join me in applauding your resolution and hoping for your success."

"But I want it to be a surprise," he said.

At that, my heart *sank*.

"But why?," I asked.

"For Phyllida's sake," he answered. "I've not seen her since that week-end at the Hall, I've not written to her; and she can't write to me, because she doesn't know where I am. I presume she's not engaged, because I've seen no announcement of it, but I don't want to do anything that may stand in her light. If my present scheme fails, I shall have to start on something else; if it succeeds—and when it succeeds—, it will be time enough for me to see what's happened to her. I've never forgotten our talk. If I didn't love a girl, I might cheerfully marry her for her money; but, when I *do*

love her, I couldn't bear to have people even hinting such a thing. You told me that she had four thousand of her own; when I can go to her father and say that I'm making more than that—clear profit to my own pocket—, I shan't be afraid to look any one in the face. But I've not asked her to wait for me; and, if in the meantime she meets any one that she wants to marry more, no one will ever hear me complain."

And then he buttoned himself into his coat—even now I couldn't *quite* get over the disc with the number on it, hanging from a button-hole—, picked up his cap and held out his hand.

I walked to the door,—and then my heart seemed to stop. You may remember that the horn of our car has a note which I at least find unmistakable. I heard it in the distance, I heard it coming nearer. Phyllida and Will! It was only twelve, and I had not expected them for hours. Evidently the dance had not been to their liking. I *prayed* that I might prove equal to the crisis. . . .

"Colonel Butler!," I cried. (One never troubled to think whether he should *rightly* be given his military rank). "Shut that door! Run upstairs to the drawing-room! Hide there till I fetch you, but on no account turn on the light! My niece is coming now; if you want to avoid her. . . ."

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

He acted with great decision and literally *dashed* upstairs. I heard the door gently closing as Will fitted his key into the lock. . . My dear, I am too old for excitements of this kind; my heart was *beating*; I had no idea what to say if they asked me why a taxi was standing there unattended. Oh, and I felt *sure* Phyllida would say she had left her work or her book in the drawing-room. . .

It was agony! I *could* not persuade them to go to bed. First of all they wanted to know why I was still up, then they must needs tell me about their party, then Phyllida wanted a cigarette, then Will wanted to give her some soda-water. One false start after another. . . When at *last* I thought I had set them moving, Phyllida sat down again and said:

“Will dear, see if there are any letters for me, there’s an angel.”

Do you know, I was so much *obsessed* by the thought of that man in the drawing-room that I was *blind* to everything else. As my boy went into the hall, I felt that I had *seen* a change without noticing it, if you understand me. Will was transformed, elated . . . and there was a new gentleness about Phyllida. When he brought the letters to her, I could see that he pressed her hand; and she sighed wistfully and then smiled. *Now* I could understand

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

why they complained that the dance was so crowded, no room to sit, impossible even to talk. . .

“Read those upstairs, dear Phyllida,” I begged.

And I took her arm and led her up, past that terrifying drawing-room, into safety. Will . . . When I returned, he wanted to talk; but I implored him to go up and let me come to him in a moment. He was curious, mystified . . . but at least he could not doubt my earnestness. Then at last I released my prisoner and hurried him through the hall and into the street. When I had shut the door I leaned against it, panting. I couldn't walk, I could hardly stand. . .

“And now, Will?,” I said, when I was able to drag myself upstairs.

“There's nothing much to tell—as yet,” he answered. “You've probably seen that she's been getting steadily more miserable the last few days. I asked her to-night what it was all about, though I knew that she was eating her heart out for this Butler fellow. She would only say that she was unhappy and lonely; and I told her that was all rot, because any number of men would be in love with her if she gave them half a chance. Then she said it was no good, because she couldn't give them any love in return, her heart was dead. . . The usual rot a girl talks.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I told her that, so far as I was concerned, I'd gladly risk all that; and she said she didn't care who she married or what became of her and she wished she'd never been born. . . 'That,' said Will, "was nearer by a long chalk than I've ever been before; and you may take it as absolutely certain that, if she doesn't hear anything of Butler pretty soon. . . She dried up and began to talk of something else when I tried to pin her to a day, but she was quite decent to me as we drove home."

I could say nothing until I had been given time to digest his news. Whoever Will marries must have *some* money; he has earned nothing since he resigned his post at Morecambe. . . Perhaps dear Phyllida thinks a little too much about herself to be the perfect wife for Will, but it is not cynical to say that, if you look for perfection in woman or man, you will never marry. One has to consider the balance of advantage. . . I did most earnestly want to see Will established in life and settled down before those dreadful blackmailing Phentons could make another descent on us. And it would do Phyllida so much good to marry. . .

After all my excitements and alarms, I could not sleep for sheer thankfulness. And, when my tea was brought me and Phyllida of all people came in with it, I felt that now at last

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

my Will must have dropped the handkerchief and she was coming to tell me that she had picked it up.

“My dear, what makes you so energetic?,” I asked.

As a rule she insisted on lying in bed until all hours and having her breakfast brought to her there, *making* work for my unhappy servants.

“I want to know if you can tell me Hilary Butler’s address?,” she said.

“I’ve never heard it,” I told her. “How should I?”

“Apparently he came here yesterday. When I went down to get my bag, I found his gloves in the hall. But they only have his initials.”

I *did* wish that Phyllida had been less collected and businesslike! Hard, not daring to let herself go. . . I ought to have *looked*, I suppose, to see that he was leaving nothing behind, but one cannot think of everything. And now I knew that Phyllida would start all over again. . .

Yet one must *expect* an occasional relapse. . .

“I’ve never heard it,” I told her again.

She did not trouble to ask anything more. . . Just looked at me for a moment. I made

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

up my mind that her visit must be cut short; if *I* had met Colonel Butler, *she* might. And I have no doubt of any kind that she would do what she threatens and *ask* him to marry her. And he wouldn't refuse. Moreover, I am not *made* of money, as she and Will seemed to think. . .

Brackenbury was a fool not to send her *right* away, as I recommended. Nothing is decided; I sometimes wonder whether anything ever *will* be decided. We are precisely where we stood before. . .

I had time to warn Will, I am thankful to say. A girl who shilly-shallies like that. . . I shall make the best of it, if I have to; but I am not sure she is the sort of wife for my boy. . .

VIII

LADY ANN SPENWORTH REFERS TO HER DIARY

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion):
It is only a question of habit. When I first went to Italy, at the age of sixteen, my dear mother insisted that I should keep a diary, and I have kept one ever since. Goodness me, I am more likely to overlook my letters or the morning paper than forget to write up my journal. Sometimes it is only a few lines, for the spacious days are over, I am a dull old woman, and the most I ask of life is that I may be allowed to live. Very often I let months go by without turning back to see what I have written; but the record is there if I ever want to consult it. Usually at the end of the year one likes to take stock. . .

Not that it is very cheerful reading, alas! But at our age we must expect that. Another year gone, when perhaps we cannot hope to see so very many more; another hope dashed and yet another deferred, making the heart sick; gaps in the circle of those one loves; increasing frailty or ill-health; and that indefinable, inexplicable narrowing of outlook, interest,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

enthusiasm—and with us, I am afraid, of worldly circumstance. Inevitable. . . For oneself, perhaps, one does not mind it, but it is sometimes heart-rending to see the boys and girls setting out with those high hopes that we have been compelled, one by one, to discard; heart-rending, too, when those who seemed to walk with their heads on a level with the stars trip and sprawl like the rest. . .

No, I assure you I was not thinking of any one in particular. The feeling returns with the season and is quite general. One could find particular applications, no doubt, very near at hand. Begin where you will: my brother-in-law Spenworth. . . I wonder what we shall be thinking of him in a year's time; divorced, remarried—and nobody one penny the worse! I am not ashamed to confess that, when the word "divorce" is mentioned, I am translated to another sphere. . . Groping blindly among things I don't understand and don't *want* to understand. . . Say what you will, we were *not* so lax a generation ago; those who fell remained where they fell . . . or climbed back with effort, difficulty *and an acknowledgement of wrongdoing*. Not as of right. . . The new Lady Spenworth I hardly know; she who marries a man that has been put away. . . I have not refused to meet her, but the opportunity has

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

not come my way. Whether she will be able to *hold* him. . . Perhaps if she presents him with an heir . . . though I have had to change my views on *that* subject, as you know. Oh, I can speak about it now; and I shall never forget, when things were at their blackest, it was *you* who came to me with your divine sympathy. I could tell you the whole story if you truly honestly would not be bored; *your* discretion has been proved. . . I have lost the thread. . .

Ah, yes!—the family. . . My nephew Culroyd—and Hilda? I am humbly thankful to say that there has been no catastrophe so far, though when the first, honeymoon intoxication wears off. . . Long may it be delayed, for they are the one bright spot in my poor brother Brackenbury's life. That pathetic child Phyllida is still breaking her heart over the cabman-colonel whom I, if you please, am supposed to have set against her in order to keep her for my boy. Thank goodness, she does not *know* he is driving a cab! Breaking her heart or pretending to. And I really think my brother encourages her. He wouldn't send her *right* away as I advised; and now he pats her hand and looks worried when she comes down *boasting* that she hasn't slept. And Ruth does the same. . . I don't want to *bring* bad luck by

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

talking about it; but I sometimes wonder how much longer Brackenbury will put up with that—*invertebrate* woman; I sometimes fear that the record of the year will shew that there, too, the blow has fallen. We have seen to our cost that the most devoted husband and father may sometimes go apparently quite mad. . . I feel that Phyllida, with her youth and her looks and her money, is being so shamefully *wasted*. . .

But, until she shakes off her obsession, I should pity any man who tried to marry her. At one time my boy Will seemed attracted to her out of compassion for her loneliness and misery. Those were anxious days, I can assure you, though I should have been glad to see Will safely married to almost any one. He is undoubtedly of an age; and what I called “the Morecambe menace”. . . We have heard nothing of the Phentons (you know, I always called her Miss Molly “Wanton”) since the father conducted his blackmailing descent upon us, protesting that Will had made this girl an offer of marriage, talking about horse-whips. I hope and pray that it is all over, but one can never be certain. For the last fortnight I have succeeded in *not* thinking about them; I suppose I should be grateful to Arthur for turning my thoughts. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

You are quite right! I have tried to avoid speaking bitterly *to* him, I must not speak bitterly *about* him. But, when the news came to me, I said: "Now indeed the bottom has fallen out of the world." It was towards the end of the year, and I had been turning the pages of my journal. Catastrophe, disappointment, anxiety. . . . But, whatever storms may blow, I said, I can always trust my husband. Arthur was my rock and anchor. He and I seemed to stand erect, with our heads level with the stars, while these others, one after another, tripped and sprawled. And then Arthur too. . . .

I tell you now, as I told you then: I had heard and suspected *nothing* until you put me on my guard. I truly believe that the person most affected is commonly the last to hear. . . . And Arthur's way of life made it almost impossible for me even to guess: for years he has spent as much time away from me as with me—his board-meetings in London and Birmingham, his shooting . . . and, with Will at home, there was so much *unhappy* friction that I was not sorry when one or other went off and left me in peace for a few days. I did not enquire; so was it surprising that, if the board-meetings and so on were simply a *blind*, I should be the last person to hear? So with money.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

My father-in-law's will was so iniquitous. . . Cheniston and the house in Grosvenor Square went naturally to Spenworth; but every penny, with the exception of a wretched thousand a year for Arthur,—that was sheer wickedness. *My* dear father would have done more for me if he could; but he had impoverished himself when he was ambassador at Vienna, and, until Brackenbury sold himself to Ruth, we were all very, very poor. The result has been that throughout my married life we have been forced to pinch and scrape. You may say that the house in Mount Street was an extravagance, but one had to live somewhere. It was for one's friends rather than oneself; I could not ask the princess to dine with me in Bayswater. . . Pinch and scrape, scrape and pinch. Arthur made a fair income by his director's fees, but I had dreadful moments when I thought of the future. Spenworth will do no more than he has already done—that we know—; when I lay at death's door and begged him with what might have been my last breath to make a settlement on Will—his own nephew. . . And at Brackenbury it is canny, north-country little Ruth who holds the purse-strings . . . and dispenses her charity, offering to pay for my operation and reminding me that, when Will was at Eton, the bills came to them. . . I have felt for more

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

years than I like to count that pinching and scraping are my appointed lot. . .

Of recent months the task became almost too much for my powers. Not only the cost of living. . . Will had lost this Morecambe appointment without finding another. Arthur complained that figure-head directors were not in so great request as formerly; he was shame-faced about it, as though his pride were hurt; I did not then imagine that he had to give me less money because he was giving more in another quarter. . .

And you will remember that, when you told me, I refused to believe it. Goodness me, I am not so vain as to think that the man who once loved me *must* always love me, but there is such a thing as loyalty—and gratitude. I had trusted him . . . and that was enough; I did not need to tell him—or you—or even myself that he had enjoyed the best years of my life, that I was an old woman while he was still—thanks to me—a young man, that I had borne him a son and worn myself out before my time in scheming and contriving for the comfort and well-being of them both. . .

It was brave of you to tell me, to insist on my knowing. . . and *believing*. I was *dazed*. That Arthur should be giving her dresses and jewellery, when he could not afford to redecorate

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

his wife's house. . . And apparently it was the common talk of the clubs; and no doubt kind friends were secretly pitying me. . . The last infatuation of the middle-aged man—they were telling one another that I was six years Arthur's senior—and what could you expect? As if I had made any secret of my age! It is in the books. And they were, perhaps, wondering how soon he would outgrow it and how much I knew and whether I minded. . . *There* was the rub—this savage, impertinent curiosity. What business of theirs if my husband humiliated me? And, strangely enough, one has so often seen it with other women and somehow always fancied that it would never happen to oneself. The swan-song. . . As a man feels that his youth is slipping out of his grasp, he makes this one last despairing effort. And love at that age is like a blow from a sledge-hammer; Arthur was prepared to run away with the woman. Indeed I know what I am talking about. Then, I felt, it *was* time for me to intervene. . .

You had been clever enough to find out the address—the house, by the way, Arthur did *not* give her. She told me so, but without that I knew enough of his finances to realize that it was physically impossible—; and all the way there I tried to understand this strange streak

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

which apparently runs through all men. The old phrase: "Sowing one's wild oats." . . . When I married Arthur, he had never had an *affaire* of *any* kind with *any* one; and so for thirty years. Am I very cynical in thinking that perhaps it would have been better if he *had*? . . . Spensworth, on the other hand, had been tossed from one woman's arms to another's ever since he was a lad at Eton. You entered his house and never knew whom you would find at the head of his table—except that it would not be the one you had seen there a month before; the only difference that marriage made to him was that, while Kathleen sat at the head of his table, he dined elsewhere. Now that he has married again in middle life, one has no sort of guarantee. It seems impossible to frame *any* rules for a man of that age. . . .

I had not spoken to Arthur beforehand, of course. He would have spoiled everything. What I wanted was a cold, passionless talk with this Mrs. Templedown. Two women, even in *our* position, could understand each other: neither of us wanted a scandal, I was prepared to admit even that she might be genuinely fond of Arthur and would try—according to her lights—to do the best for him. I need hardly say that I did not dream of intimidating—Arthur was her *property*—nor of bribing—goodness me,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

what had I to offer? Nor did I feel constrained to beg for mercy or to ask what manner of life she proposed to leave for me. I hardly think that *pride* held me in check, but—somehow—to go on one's knees to a young woman who started life on the stage was hardly. . . Well, as my boy would say, "It is not done." I knew she was clever, I hoped to find her sensible; and then the only thing was to decide what to *do*. . .

Of course I did not send up my name. . .

"Say that a lady wishes to see her," I told the maid.

And I was shewn upstairs readily enough. *Not* into the drawing-room; I think that class of person lives entirely in her bedroom. She was lying on the sofa in a kimono and—so far as I could judge from the generous opportunities which she insisted on giving me—nothing else; a lovely animal, as she was at pains that I should see, with perfect skin, a great mane of copper hair and golden-brown eyes. Very red lips, very white teeth; I was reminded of a soft, beautiful lion-cub. She moved and stretched herself like an animal, speaking as though she were only half-awake. I don't think she could have been more than twenty. She left the stage to marry a man in the Air Force, I understand, and he was killed at the end of the war, leaving her

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

very ill-provided-for. . . “*Seductive*” was the word I was trying to think of. . .

“It’s easy to see why men should fall down and worship *you*,” I said.

“Who’s in love with me now?,” she asked with the laugh of a child, *exulting* in her beauty, as it were, until in a flash I saw that her whole life was natural to her. . . Inevitable, I might say.

“Arthur Spenworth,” I told her.

“Oh, he’s a dear old thing,” she answered.

“He is my husband,” I said.

I might have added “and the father of our boy,” but I would make no *appeal*; I had come there to decide dispassionately what had to be done. . . The woman jumped up and faced me, but I stood my ground. Her eyes kept changing in expression, and I saw that she was first bewildered . . . and then defiant . . . then curious . . . then a little ashamed, then defiant again and once more bewildered.

“Well?,” she said; and then in spite of herself, as it were, “You’re not a bit like what I expected.”

“Older perhaps?,” I asked. “My dear young lady, my husband and I are much of an age, but he carries his years better. Why, goodness me, you are a child! Our boy must be ten years older than you. . . Won’t you ask

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

me to sit down? Walking upstairs makes me out of breath, and I want to have a little talk with you. I have only just heard of this; and I want to know what is to be done. You will find me a reasonable woman, I hope, and perhaps I know too much of the world to judge hastily or reproach easily. Won't you tell me everything, so that we may understand better how we are situated?"

Do you know, *because* I remained dispassionate, I felt in a moment that I was holding my own and in another moment that I was gaining ground. I who had walked upstairs wondering whether my knees would give way under me. . . It was Mrs. Templedown who was embarrassed. . . And I had not sought to make myself a ruler or a judge. . .

I will not weary you with the story. Arthur had met her—in the train from Birmingham! Is there not dignity and distinction in that? He had asked her to dine with him on reaching London, they had met three or four times, Arthur had begun giving her little presents. How much one can *ever* believe of such a woman's story I do not profess to judge. She *vowed* that their relations were innocent, that her husband's death had left her heart-broken and that she was simply and sincerely grateful to any man who shewed her a little kindness;

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

in that class I gather it is only natural for every girl to have some benevolent elderly protector who takes her out to dinner and gives her little presents. If it had not been Arthur, I was to understand, it would have been some one else. I confess that her ingenuousness rang a little hollow when she betrayed how intimately and accurately she knew who he was—the connection with Spenworth on one side and with Brackenbury on the other; like the rest of them, she hunted with one quarry—or one type of quarry—definitely in view. . .

After the little presents came the big presents—dresses, jewellery and sums of money which she did not specify. One thought of the *rags* that one had worn oneself during the war. . . No shame in telling me about *that*! She had nothing of her own except this house which the husband had left her, and Arthur would have been hurt if she had refused. . . So charming! So delicate—on both sides. . . By and by Arthur seems to have become more exacting, but the girl vowed again that she kept him at arm's length—knowing her own value, one presumes. I did not enquire very closely into this aspect of the campaign, as I knew only too well what was coming. When everything else failed, he would have to offer her marriage—by way of the Divorce Court.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“And that is how things stand now?,” I asked, as she came to the end of her story.

“That’s what he *wants*,” she answered. “Oh, but I can’t discuss it with you, Lady Ann.”

“My dear young lady,” I said, “that is just what we have to do—quite dispassionately, to decide what’s best. He is my husband, I love him in spite of everything; you love him too, I judge, and we have to put our heads together. You will go away with him, I take it?”

It was then that she began to cry. I knew it would come sooner or later. *Convulsively*. . . I have told you that she was nothing more nor less than a child. . .

“Yes,” she sobbed.

“To France? Next Thursday?”

It was no second-sight on my part, I can assure you. Arthur had arranged to visit Paris and Lyons—on business, I was told—and the guess was natural, though Mrs. Templedown seemed to think I was some sort of witch.

“Yes,” she answered again. And then—really, you know, for all the world as though we were at a play: “Oh, don’t torture me!”

Torture her. . . ?

“And then,” I said, “my husband will write to tell me he loves you and has been unfaithful to me and is never coming back and I had better

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

divorce him and he is sorry for the unhappiness he is causing me. . .”

Those terrible letters that the papers always publish. I never read them myself. In the school in which I was brought up, divorce lay beyond the pale: “Whom God hath joined. . .”

“And then you *will* divorce him, won't you?” she asked.

Really, you know, it was almost comic! She was afraid, after *plunging* herself in dishonour, that I might refuse to divorce Arthur so that she could never marry him.

“If he asks me,” I promised. “I am thinking solely of his happiness. He could not live with you unless you were married—I am not now thinking of *Right* or *Wrong*; it would cause too great a scandal, and he would have to resign his various public positions. I only hope that the divorce will not compel him to do that, for you will both be entirely dependent on the fees that he earns. We find it hard enough to live on his income as it is, by ceaseless scraping and pinching, denying ourselves little luxuries. . . I hope you are a good house-keeper? . . .

Do you know, as soon as I said it, I realized what an absurd question it was. One look at her, one glance at the room, the least spark of imagination, any guess at what she was and what her life had been! An economical house-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

keeper indeed! I wish I could describe her room to you: great bowls and vases of the *most* expensive flowers, boxes of sweets, cigarettes; all the magazines and illustrated papers that one really *does* think twice about before buying. . . . Clothes, too. . . . I am sure that even my niece Phyllida or Culroyd's wife, who seem to have money to burn, would not have quite such a profusion. *Lingerie*, gloves, handkerchiefs, the *finest* silk stockings—and everything thrown about on floor and chairs like so much waste-paper. And I in *rags* that truly honestly I am ashamed for my maid to see. . . . Her dressing-table alone supported a small fortune—bottles and boxes and looking-glasses and brushes that really made me feel a pauper. The door of her bathroom was open—in that class it is a point of honour never to shut anything or put anything away—, and I saw the most extravagant array of salts and soaps and powders and scents . . . like the tiring-room of some great eastern queen. Things I simply couldn't afford; we discontinued bath-salts when the war broke out and one had an excuse for economizing, and we have never resumed them.

“I don't know what your plans are, Mrs. Templedown,” I said. “If you return to the stage, everything may be different, but I know my husband's income to a penny. The court

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

will no doubt insist that he makes what provision he can for my son and myself; I should be greatly surprised if he could allow you more than about a thousand a year."

"Well, I suppose it's possible to manage on that," she said.

It was *pathetic!* Money had no *meaning* for her! And, so long as other people paid the bills, what else could you expect? It must have required twice that sum to keep that beautiful body of hers in its present embarrassing state of semi-nudity.

"A thousand pounds—at present prices," I said very distinctly, "for two people—to cover everything—, it's not much, you will find. And, if you have been used to luxury, you will miss it more than a person who has always had to live on a small income. That is your affair, of course, and you mustn't think me brutal if I tell you candidly that I'm considering my husband as much as I can and you not at all. You are young enough to take care of yourself, but he needs a great deal of looking after. . ."

I paused to let my words sink in. Of course she didn't believe me! Because Arthur had squandered a few hundreds on her, she thought he could produce thousands merely by pressing a bell; and, when she had sucked him dry, she expected Spensworth and Brackenbury to come

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

forward. I *had* to tell her how things really were. . . We should *all* be poorer than we are by a divorce. . . Though she clearly did not believe me, she was impressed; she was thinking. In that class one doesn't think very much, apparently. I gathered that she could not go back to the stage; she had no position there and could only hope for work in the chorus. . .

“Old Boy says it will be all right,” she said, and I could see that she was exhausted by the rare exertion of thinking. Until you have heard your husband described as “Old Boy” by a half-naked chorus-girl who is slowly bleeding him to death, you have not realized how highly your self-restraint may be tested. . .

“I don't suggest more than that it will be an effort,” I said. “My dear young lady, I speak with some knowledge. You were married for a few months to a husband whom you hardly saw and who spent what money he had like water. I have kept house for more than thirty years on an income which you would not think large, but which is bigger than anything you can hope for. I know something of men and their ways and their extravagances and humours. It will be a great change, and I only hope that you will prove equal to it.” I pointed—not unkindly—at the litter in her room. “I trust for your

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

sake as well as his that you will learn habits of tidiness.”

“Is Old Boy a fusser?,” she asked.

I wish to be judged by results. If you tell me that the end has justified the means, I give you complete freedom to say that I spoke of Arthur as one might speak of a cook when one’s name had been furnished as a reference. I gave him a character—for his next employer. No, indeed, he was not what the young woman could fairly call a “fusser”, but all men of his age had contracted certain habits. He abominated untidiness and unpunctuality—the necessary fruit of his business-training; though generous, he had long been compelled to be *careful* about money. I offered to shew her my books, but she said she didn’t think she could understand them. And so on and so forth. He was very particular about his food, and in this respect Mrs. Templedown would have to be a veritable martinet—not only to the servants but to him.

“My dear young lady,” I said, “you know what men of that age are like—or perhaps you still don’t. My husband is essentially temperate, but he is also criminally injudicious. He thinks that an occasional glass of champagne—he cannot afford to drink it regularly—is good for him; *I know better*. Acidity. . . Whisky

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

and soda—two, if he likes—, one glass of port and nothing else. The moment he takes liberties with himself, his digestion suffers, he cannot sleep—and *you* pay the penalty. Similarly with what he eats; he must never be given butcher's meat more than once a day, shell-fish of every kind are poison to him, and, though he will never admit it, any rich sweets tell their tale next day. I could give you a list, but you will find out for yourself. . . Smoking again . . . one cigar does him no harm, after two he can hardly breathe; all the Spenworths are liable to bronchitis. And exercise. My husband was quite an athlete as a young man; he says he doesn't need exercise, but *I know better*. If I may speak quite openly, he suffers from what men call 'liver.' . . I should dearly like to give you a little list of things, if you won't think me impertinent; one does not live with a man for more than thirty years without coming to regard him as one's child. . ."

And, whether she liked it or not, then and there, I took pencil and paper and just jotted things down. He would never put on his winter underclothes unless some one reminded him; result—a week in bed with a severe chill. . .

"You make him out to be a complete crock," said Mrs. Templedown. Poor soul! one hardly looked for any great *elegance* from her. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“Not that, by any means,” I told her, “but, at his age, a man has to be careful.”

We were still at work on the list when her maid came in and whispered that she had to dress and be out to dinner in half an hour. She was, I understand, going to a dance.

“Not with Arthur!” I said.

Oh no! She was going with some friend of her husband. I told her that, if Arthur was ever persuaded or even allowed to stay up after midnight, one paid for it next day. . . She asked if I would not wait with her while she dressed, but I was glad to escape while the maid was still in the room. The parting, had we been by ourselves, must inevitably have been difficult. As it was, we just shook hands. . .

I honestly cannot tell you whether I expected to hear anything more. I did not know what to think and was trying to keep my mind a blank. . . She came next day, when Arthur was out; it was pleasant to feel that she knew more of his movements than I did! We—my maid and I—were upstairs, looking through Arthur’s clothes before packing them to go abroad with him. I sent the maid out of the room and asked if Mrs. Templedown would mind coming up to me. And, when she came, I added practice to theory. Until you *do* it, you’re hardly conscious of it; but you cannot

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

be a man's wife for thirty-two years without finding out thirty-two *thousand* little peculiarities about him. I had spoken about the winter underclothing already. . . . I gave her the prescription for his tonic and told her where to have it made up and when he must be *forced* to take it—the symptoms, danger-signals. . . . My dear, I talk *frankly* to you and I sometimes fear that you must think me terribly sordid, but truly honestly, if one neglects small things, one neglects everything. You may fancy that there is little difference between two shillings and half-a-crown on a bottle of medicine, but, when you take the medicine for half the year and multiply the difference by twenty-six,—thirteen shillings! Multiply that one item of medicine by half a hundred things. . . . I am not very enthusiastically supported; at dinner it is always “Why don't we ever have this or that?,” when this or that is out of season and *prohibitive*; even Will rounded on me once and said that his poor old mother had reduced *meanness* to a fine art. I had to bite my lip! From *Will*. . . . I told poor little Mrs. Templedown everything; and, if you say that I failed in loyalty to Arthur, I can only answer that the end must justify the means and that I am content to be judged by results.

“And now,” I said, “I can only wish you

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

good luck. I am nothing to you, but, if you ever feel kindly disposed to a dull old woman, do your best for Arthur, keep him happy—for my sake. You are making a great experiment and taking a great risk; you, and you alone, can crown it with success. When you both ask me to divorce my husband, I shall take the necessary steps; but I shall do nothing hastily. Perhaps, when you have been with him for a time, you will find that the difficulties are greater than you anticipated—or, let me say, that success is harder of achievement than you hoped. I ask only one thing: do not force yourselves into an extremity from any false pride. Be candid with me, as I have been candid with you. Should you find only *failure* and the *prospect* of failure, recognize it boldly. Write to me. Say ‘It has not turned out as we expected. Your husband is coming back to you.’ I shall receive him without reproaches, I shall know nothing. He will find his favourite dinner, his chair and cigar, his book and ‘night-cap’, as he calls it. . . . I shall be truly glad to see him back, but I look at you, with all your youth and beauty; I know that I must not keep him if you are his hope of happiness. Kiss me, dear child,” I said, “and do better for him than I have been able to do.”

A singular meeting! She stayed with me

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

for nearly two hours longer. I won't say "not speaking a word", but I can say "not finishing a sentence." Bewildered. . . Then she went away, and I rang for my maid. I never heard from her again. On Thursday—the Thursday—Arthur found his suit-case and kit-bag packed and labelled in the hall. "I don't want all this," he said, "for one night." . . And he was back again in three days. I *happen* to know that he went alone and returned alone—and was alone in Paris. . .

I was talking about the diary, was I not? It is not cheerful reading, and much of it is dull. This entry in question: "*Arthur returned from France tired and depressed, but very glad to be home again. . .*" It does not mean much. . .

To any one else. . .

I am not crying! I am simply *worn-out*. . .! Oh, my dear, I am too old for this kind of thing, apart from the long agony of humiliation. Arthur must send me *right* away for a *complete* change. He *can* afford it now. . .

IX

LADY ANN SPENWORTH NARRATES AN EMBARRASSMENT AVERTED

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion):
When do I start, indeed? My dear, you are not very complimentary! We have been back nearly a week. *That* shews how you have deserted me! . . . No, I never intended to be away for more than about a fortnight. You see, so long as this wild beast is at large, prowling about Morecambe and preparing to spring at any moment, I *dare* not leave Will unprotected. I really don't think I can add anything to what I've already told you; my boy himself is so very uncommunicative, and Arthur becomes alternately violent and morose when I beg in the *humblest* way for the *least* enlightenment. *My* reading of the position is that this "Molly Wanton" set her cap at Will and, when he refused to have anything to do with her, *rounded* on him until he threw up a first-rate appointment rather than stay another hour in Morecambe; then she *stuffed* her foolish father with lies until the man comes to this

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

house like a demented creature and vows that my boy promised to *marry* his Molly.

Indeed I know what I am talking about. In this very room, though Arthur would not allow me to be present: it was not "a woman's province." Clergyman or no, the mad old father would have had short shrift from *me*. "Proof, my good man," I would have said, "proof." . . . That is how the matter stands at present, and you can realize that, while we are braced to receive the next onslaught, there can be no question of long, careless holidays.

But I was glad I went even for a short time. Even to Menton, which truly honestly is only a suburb of Monte Carlo (I had a reason), even with the railways in their present abominable condition—the French seem to be making no *effort* to pull themselves together after the war except by means of wholesale robbery. They have clearly decided that, as we came to their rescue and paid for their war, it is now our bounden duty to pay for them in peace as well. . . I always believe in going *right* away after a domestic crisis of that kind; and I was really beginning to fear a break-down if I stayed any longer in London. There is a curious convention that there is something *funny* about a man of Arthur's age and position falling under the

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

spell of a little chorus-girl; it is less funny when you have to fight for your life to preserve *your* husband and the father of *your* child. Some form of madness that overtakes men. . . I have not told you, I never *shall* tell you what Arthur was like when he found that this girl had thrown him over at the last moment. Dazed. . . His behaviour to *me* seemed of *no* account; the fact that I knew everything from the girl's own lips and had helped to pack the clothes in which he was to run away with her. . . He was like a man in a trance. . .

I uttered no word of reproach. It was unnecessary. At first he behaved as if the light had gone out of his life—which was pleasant for me; then he seemed to realize that perhaps some amends were owing to me. . . Assented immediately to my proposal that we should go right away. . .

I chose Menton because Sir Appleton Deepe was there. He, I fancy, would be the first to tell you that I really *made* him. Unheard-of before the war, except in business. . . I wanted his advice about Will: where he could lay out his talents to greatest advantage, as it were; and, though nothing has been decided definitely, I *have* a promise, and he is most anxious to meet Will. . . So one's time was not *wasted*. . .

And there, in the peace and wonderful sun-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

shine, one had an opportunity of recovering one's perspective. I had tided Arthur through his great crisis; and there was nothing, I felt, to fear in the future. But we could not let it rest at that. There had been an intolerable amount of malicious gossip—how wide-spread I could not believe until the proof was thrust before me—; men jesting in their clubs, women gloating. . . . And you may be sure that the Brackenbury and Spenworth broods were only too delighted to think that yet another had been dragged down to their level; if one was not to be a by-word and an object of scorn. . . . Goodness me, I wasn't thinking of my own poor dignity, but these stories had to be stopped somehow. In the school in which I was brought up one was supposed to set something of an example; for what it may be worth, one *does* occupy a certain *niche*; it was more than time for us to shew that there had *been* no catastrophe, as our kind friends would have liked to think.

“ Arthur,” I said, “ you will never hear me allude to this again. We have passed through a time of trouble, but God has mercifully brought us into safety. For some months we have been spied on and whispered about; it is our duty to shew a happy and united front!”

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Arthur said at once that he would do whatever I wanted. . .

You do not often hear me talking of "position" or "dignity" or "rights", but I did indeed feel that any poor little *niche* we might occupy was threatened. Spenworth's own record is so infamous that people would feel it was only natural for his brother to tread the same path. I am not ashamed to confess that I *do* feel what people say about me. *Some* people. . . And it was these people, the people who *mattered*, that I wanted to convince; if there was indeed no rift between Arthur and me, why should we allow the gossips to pretend there was? . . .

I decided to signalize our return to England by a little party—just a few friends to dinner, a little music, a few more friends coming in if they had nothing better to do. I have never found it necessary to inform the world—as your Mrs. Tom Noddys do—that they have left Gloucester Place for Eastbourne or Eastbourne for Gloucester Place. Goodness me, "Who wonders—and who cares?," as they say. But I was *not* sorry to find that our little party was being discussed; and, of course, when once the princess's name was mentioned, the papers came at me with open arms. . . I left no stone unturned to make a success of the little gather-

ing. We have always been quite pitifully restricted in our entertaining, but this was not the moment to grudge a few extra pounds well laid-out. . . . And it does not require a mathematician to prove that Arthur could have given me more money if he had given less in other directions. Of course, I did not *hint* such a thing; my dear, *peace, forgiveness, forgetfulness* was what I wanted. . . . And it was not necessary; Arthur assented to everything.

First of all I made certain of the princess. What she can see in a dull old woman like me you must ask *her*; but she has been a *true* and *loving* friend for perhaps more years than either of us now cares to recall; and, if humble affection and gratitude matter to her, she knows that they are hers whenever she does me the honour of visiting my house. . . . She likes coming, I know; in me, she has been gracious enough to say, she finds an attitude of mind, a point of view which is disappearing only too fast; in a sense—I am sure she would be the first to excuse my presumption—we were brought up in the same school.

There was no difficulty about securing my brother. It is a pose with Brackenbury to pretend that he hates what he calls “orders-and-decorations” parties, but my sister-in-law is not

so jaded. Perhaps in the world in which she was reared. . . I certainly notice marked civility and almost affection if Ruth hears that I am giving a party and that the princess has graciously consented to be present. My niece Phyllida is *less* punctilious in her courtesy; there is rather too much of the "Oh-I-don't-care-*what-I-do*" attitude about her, and, since she found that her cabman hero was still alive and somewhere in London. . . A curious recklessness and restlessness. . . I invited her because I cannot bear to see a girl—young, well-connected, rich, good-looking—simply *moping*. . . They say it takes two to make a quarrel, and I have refused to quarrel with Phyllida, so that at last I think she has ceased to believe that I turned the cabman hero against her in the hope of keeping her for my boy. I—have—not—lifted—a—*finger*! She evidently enjoys being with Will; and, if he wanted to marry her, I should not stand in the way. Ever since that Morecambe nightmare began, I have felt that I shall never know a moment's peace until he is safely married. . .

I don't *want* him to go abroad. . . When any one in his position seeks his fortune in a foreign country, there is always a tendency among some people to ask what he has *done*, to treat him as a remittance-man . . . which is

offensive without being particularly amusing. . . I have lost the thread. . .

Ah, yes! My little party. One thing I noticed on returning to England was the extraordinary mixture of people that one met everywhere. For this, though I am personally fond of her, I blame Connie Maitland more than any dozen other women. Not being a *persona grata* in certain circles to which she would dearly like to have the *entrée*, she seems to cultivate numbers for their own sake. When the princess . . . More by a hint, you understand, than by any direct criticism. . . But she cannot help seeing that the old barriers *have* been broken down. . . It is always on the tip of my tongue to make my Lady Maitland wholly responsible. During the war one was *flung* against these people, as it were: the strangest generals who seemed to have been stock-brokers the moment before. . . All that sort of thing. . . “Captains of Industry” (I believe they are called) with the queerest accents and all holding high office. There was an *epidemic* of cabinet rank; and, if one had business in Whitehall, one met the oddest people—never the same two days running. Connie Maitland *thoroughly* enjoyed herself, I always felt; so many new people to know before any one else. (I am not ashamed to confess that it is *not* my ambition simply to

know new people.) When I returned from Menton, I did drop a little hint and suggest that, as the war was now over, she ought to revise some of her war friendships. Quite kindly and gradually, you understand; I know that with some of the really estimable women who sat on committees with me. . . . "Is it true kindness?," I asked myself. "They lead their lives, you lead yours; the war brought you together, but you've *nothing* else in common. . . ." After that breath of fresh air at Menton, I was honestly truly aghast to find what London had become without one's noticing it. I sought an opportunity of speaking to the princess about it: I felt some one ought to make a little stand. I don't count, because I'm not in a position to entertain; but I did resolve to confine my little party *simply* to the old friends. . . .

I invited Spensworth. . . . You look surprised; but, if you will think for a moment. . . . Arthur's brother. It was notorious that I had for years disapproved of his whole way of life, but the family had to shew a united front. His *very* recent divorce, which—between ourselves—I think was forgiven far too quickly; goodness me, I hope I am not a bigot and I would assuredly persecute no one, but "whom God hath joined together". . . . I invited him chiefly

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

on his wife's account; her position is not so secure that she can altogether dispense with a supporting hand, and I was tired of confessing to people that I had not even met her. . . Never can I forget, either, Spenworth's triumph when for a moment Arthur seemed to be treading his path. . . *My Nemesis* for trying to hold my head erect and daring to reprove him. No, I did not hear what he said, but I am certain that he said it. . .

For several days—to my amazement, for I knew they were at Cheniston—there was no reply. Then I met Spenworth in the street.

“Oh, I say!,” he began. (You know that *hunting-field* voice of his?) “You aren't playing the game with poor old Arthur, you know.”

“I'm afraid I must beg for enlightenment,” I said.

“Oh, well, you know, this is the first time the poor old boy has ever left the rails.” (I am always lost in admiration of Spenworth's *elegance!*) “Dust his jacket for him at home as much as you like, but don't make him eat humble-pie in public, don't make an exhibition of him.”

“I don't know what you *mean*,” I said.

“Oh, bunkum! Every one knows he tried to slip his collar, every one thought he'd got away; and, now that you've recaptured him,

you want to shew him off in his muzzle. 'Tain't cricket, Ann, if you ask me; you've won, and there's no need to crow over the old boy. 'Tain't as if he'd given you any trouble before."

"I must give it up," I said in despair. "Spensworth, will you tell me—in language comprehensible to my poor wits—whether you and your wife are coming to dine on the eighteenth?"

"Thank you very much, Ann," he answered, "we are *not*. 'Matter o' fact, I'm taking the chair at a regimental dinner, but if I *wasn't*. . . I think it's an infernal shame and I hope it's a rotten party."

And then he turned on his heel. . .

I can never see his charm, myself. People excuse his rudeness, his immorality, his utterly wasted, self-indulgent life. . . They say he's "such a good fellow", whatever that may mean. . . But I find it very hard to speak *coolly* about Spensworth. . .

Without wanting to be inhospitable, I was secretly *relieved* that he could not come. The dear princess is the soul of tolerance, but I was not at all sure how she would receive his name; I was not at all sure that he would even behave himself properly. Did I ever tell you how he set himself to drive the Archbishop out of the

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

house by sheer—but I prefer not to discuss it. “Indecency” is really the only word; under the guise of an ethical discussion. . . . As we literally *cannot* sit down more than twenty-four in Mount Street, two spare places *are* a consideration. I was fortunate enough to secure the Duke and Duchess of Yarrow; one had not seen much of them for some years, and the duchess is so deaf that I sometimes wonder whether she is really quite right in her head, but the duke is a director of the Far East Trading Company, and I thought that, if Will ever *did* think of going abroad to seek his fortune, the duke ought to know of it before he was snapped up by any one else. The others. . . . But I expect you saw the list; it was in all the papers—the Bishop of Hatwell, dear old Lady Ursula Bedmont, the Minister of Fine Arts, the Spanish Ambassador. . . .

Or was it the Italian? I’m quite stupid about remembering who was there. It was so long since I’d given a party of any kind that I’m not ashamed to confess I was a little nervous. And we began badly: Lord Fenchurch, who *really* grows more and more absent-minded every day, arrived with a black tie and one of those detestable little jackets that young men affect in theatres. Arthur was waiting in the hall to receive the princess and in a

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

moment had him fitted out properly, while a maid dashed to Hay Hill to fetch his St. George. (As Arthur said, "We can lend you anything from the South African medal to the Victorian Order, but we *don't* fly as high as Garters.")

One or two *tiny* hitches like that, just enough to make me nervous. . . . When the princess arrived, all was transformed: she was more than gracious, wanting to know why she never saw anything of me nowadays. . . . Some people are quite wonderfully able to give you that sense of *well-being*. I presented Will. She said:

"But *you're* not old enough to have a grown-up son!"

"I am old enough to be *proud* of it, ma'am," I said.

I don't think I am *envious*; but, when I saw the success of my little party, when I looked at Brackenbury, who *has* the money and does nothing with it, *and* at Ruth, who couldn't do anything with it if she wanted to . . . just an over-grown school-girl. . . . When I thought of Spensworth and the *opportunities* at Cheniston, I felt it was a little hard. . . . They *do* come to me, gladly, graciously; and I am not in a position to entertain them. . . .

After dinner we had music. . . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I don't know what your experience has been, but I find it hard to remain patient with the whole world of people who delight in calling themselves "artists". (If English has any meaning, an artist is a person who *paints*, not a fiddler or a poet or an actor.) So much fuss has been made of them that their heads have really been turned. Before I had quite decided what music to have, I heard a young man playing at Connie Maitland's. Quite well he played—for an Englishman, and I asked Connie to present him.

"I have a few friends dining on the eighteenth," I said, "and I was wondering whether you would be so very kind as to come and give us an opportunity of hearing a little more of your too delightful playing."

These people *expect* to be flattered, as no doubt you know. . . .

"The eighteenth?," he repeated. "I'm not dining anywhere that night, so far as I know; I will come with great pleasure."

The impudence of the man!

"Dinner itself. . ." I said. "My dining-room is so absurdly small that I am absolutely restricted in numbers. But *afterwards*. . . I have asked a few friends, real music-lovers; say about half-past ten. The address—"

"Oh," he interrupted, "I'll ask you to get

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

in touch with my agent. He'll tell you my terms and make all arrangements."

"But there are no arrangements to make," I protested. "Lady Maitland told me that you were a new-comer to London, and I thought you might like to meet a few people. . ."

And then I told him that the princess had graciously promised to come.

The young man thought it over—for all the world as though he were at a bazaar and I were pressing him to buy something that he didn't want! I was *beside* myself. . .

"I should like to meet her," he was good enough to say. "She may be useful. All right, I'll do it this once."

And, do you know, it was on the tip of my tongue to say that *never* should he set foot inside my *house*! First of all *inviting* himself to dinner, then trying to make me *pay* him for coming. . . An artist I can understand; and a tradesman I can understand. But this hybrid. . .

And on the night he insisted on my presenting him to the princess. Insisted! There is no other word. . . She, of course, was too sweet . . . made no objection and even complimented him. I kept thinking of the old days. When my niece Phyllida came out just before the war, Brackenbury gave a ball for her

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

and asked me to do what I could (Ruth is worse than useless on such occasions, because she tries to cover up her ignorance by saying it doesn't matter—and being obstinate about it). I ordered the band—from those really nice people in Clifford Street—; and the princess was present on that occasion too. I *wondered* what we should have thought if the leader had strolled up, baton in hand, and said: "Oh, won't you present me to Her Royal Highness?" . . .

I *will* say this boy played well. Magnetically. . . The whole room was silent and motionless. One looked up through a mist, as it were, and saw rows of rapt faces, a regiment of men by the walls, a mere black and white cloud by the door.

At first I did not notice. . .

I mean, one cannot be expected to identify eighty or a hundred people all at once; the princess was obviously my first concern, and, when this young fellow ceased playing and I stood up, *naturally* I imagined that they would all come forward. So they did . . . some of them. I am *not* good at recognizing people, so I made allowances for myself; but, even so, a *great* many of the faces were unfamiliar. Nothing in that, you may say; a little music and some light refreshments—sandwiches and cake, you know, with perhaps claret-cup and

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

coffee—afford a wonderful opportunity for making a little return to people whom one truly honestly doesn't want to have *dining*; I'm sure you understand! There is nothing wrong with them or I would not invite them to have the honour of meeting the princess; but, as Will would say, they just don't pull their weight in the boat. . . I recognized one or two . . . and then, really, I did not know what to make of it. After anything I may have said to the princess about the unpleasantly go-as-you-please, enjoy-yourself-and-don't-ask-questions character of modern London, you may be sure that I had not encouraged anybody to collect the first half-dozen waifs and strays from the street and bring them in. Every one had been *told* that the princess would be there, so that they might equip themselves accordingly; yet, when I looked round the room, I did not know a tenth of the people!

It was like a bad dream! You know my drawing-room in Mount Street: windows on the south side, and between them a sofa on which I was sitting with the princess; to the left, at the far end, the piano; to the right, the door. At one moment—a perfect picture! Dear old Lord Fenchurch with his St. George, Brackenbury with the Bath, my boy with his war medals—almost every one with a little

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

something to enhance what will always be the most dignified dress in the world. Repose. . . Distinction. And then, at the door, an invading army! Men I had never seen before, some in uniform, some in those detestable little jackets and limp, pleated shirts; flushed, dishevelled. . . And all of them unknown to me as the man in the moon! The princess, perhaps you know, abominates the smell of tobacco; need I say that a positive *cloud* of smoke was bursting in from the stair-case? . . .

If it had been the men alone, I could have borne it. *Somehow* one would have carried it off. . . I made my way, through this *sea* of strange faces, to the door—and I really believe that, if I had found the *Jacquerie* in possession, I could hardly have been more astounded. *With* the men there were girls, scores and scores of them, surging up to the door, lolling about on the stairs, smoking cigarettes in the hall, powdering their horrible little noses. One glance was enough. . . The dresses alone—skirts that hardly reached their *knees*, bodices that hardly reached their *waists*, “the shoe and shoulder-strap brigade”, as my boy calls them. A reek of powder and cheap scent. . .

“What,” I said, “what have I done to deserve this?”

You would think that my cross was

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

sufficiently heavy, but I was evidently to be spared nothing. *Some of the men were not even sober!* As I came on to the landing, some one said—with great elegance—:

“Here, old thing, you’d better go home and sleep it off.”

Don’t let me claim more pity than I deserve! I *was* spared a free fight. When the Arbiter of Taste had returned from escorting his friend downstairs, I said to him:

“I must *beg* for enlightenment. There has evidently been a mistake. I cannot remember having invited you; and I think you must have come to the wrong house.”

He looked a little surprised, but rallied at once and pulled from his pocket a *menu* with the address written on it.

“We were told that you were giving a dance and that we might come,” he said. “I *am* addressing Lady Ann Spenworth, am I not?”

“You are,” I said, “but there’s some hideous mistake. Dance? There’s no dance. *Who* told you?”

“Lord Spenworth,” he answered. “At the regimental dinner. He said that you were giving a party; some of us were a bit shy of coming without an invitation, but he assured us that we should be as welcome as he was. We’d

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

all arranged to go on to Ledlow's; so, as soon as we'd found our partners, on we came. Is it the wrong night?"

"Wrong night!" I said. "All nights are wrong nights! My brother-in-law must have made a mistake. I *am* giving a little party and I invited him. . ."

And then I whispered to this boy about the princess. I must say that he behaved *well*. It can never be pleasant to find yourself in a house where you're not expected and where, only too plainly, you're not wanted. He saw my terrible position. . .

"I hope you realize it's not *our* fault," he said.

"I acquit you of *everything*," I cried. "But won't you explain to your friends and— and get them away?"

He promised to do his best, though some of the men looked anything but tractable; and I went back to the princess, hoping that the music would *drown* all the going and coming. "Play like mad!" I whispered to this boy at the piano; "Noise, at all costs!" And, as if I hadn't enough to bear, I thought he was going to take offence. Half-way through, the door opened a crack, and I saw—who do you think? Colonel Butler; Phyllida's cabman hero. Nothing could surprise me then—the

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

fact that he was in evening-dress. . . If he'd brought his cab in with him. . .

I hurried to the door, no longer caring whether he met Phyllida, whether she threw herself at his head. . . *Anything*. . .

“This is a case for heroic measures, Lady Ann,” he said, when I had explained my *tragic* position. “Some of these fellows have been doing themselves rather well and they swear they won't go without a dance. If you leave things to me, I believe I can pull you through. Certainly I'll do my best, but you must back me up in everything. Is that agreed? Then, as soon as the music stops, will you present me to the princess? I'll get hold of your husband and Will and tell them what has to be done.”

I asked leave to present him. . . The princess knew his name, knew all about him—far more than I had ever guessed. It appears that he ought to have had the V.C.; and, if it lay in my gift, he should have had it that night! Oh, I don't wonder that he did well in the war. Such coolness, determination, foresight. . .

“I expect Lady Ann has told you, ma'am,” he began, “that the Forest Rangers have been having their regimental dinner. Lady Ann has *most* kindly lent us the house for a little

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

dance later on. I want to know whether I may ask an extraordinary favour. It will give immense gratification if you will allow Lady Ann to present the officers to you before the dance begins. I know it's a very big thing to ask, because there are a great many of them; but, if you knew the pleasure you would confer, I could almost hope that you would forgive my presumption."

The princess is really and truly the sweetest woman I know. Was there a moment's hesitation? Colonel Butler brought them in, one after another, announced the names, herded them out again, brought in more. Arthur hunted them upstairs to his bedroom as they came out, so that there should be a little room on the stairs. . . . And, when she came out—this presentation was really a very clever stroke on Colonel Butler's part to give her an excuse for leaving—, there was a word and a smile for every one—praising the girls' dresses, saying she hoped that all the young people would have a *very* pleasant time. Graciousness like that cannot be *learned*, but perhaps a certain dignity *can*. To do these girls justice, they behaved quite admirably; no familiarity, no nervousness—to the outward eye. I hope for their sakes that, when they compared their own "shoes and shoulder-straps" with what was thought

fitting to be worn by another generation, trained in a different school, the lesson was not altogether thrown away. . . .

I did not suppose that Colonel Butler *seriously* intended that I should improvise a dance at a moment's notice, but I had misjudged my man. He had given his word, he said, and, if he broke it, there might be an unpleasant scene; if, however, I would back him up, he would "see me through" again. Almost before the princess was out of the house, one section was rolling back the rug in the drawing-room and disposing of the furniture. Arthur, with his coat off and his shirt-sleeves rolled up, was dashing down to the cellar and up again, bringing wine that literally cannot be replaced; and, to judge from next day's accounts, it must have been Colonel Butler himself who won over my rather unyielding cook. He has a gift of *silver* speech; the superior young man at the piano, who always left all arrangements of terms to his *agent*, if you please, sat with a bottle of champagne and a plate of sandwiches playing till *four o'clock*. . . .

The relief was so great that I really quite lost my head. Colonel Butler asked me for the first dance—quite charmingly.

"Your manners are better than your judge-

ment of age," I said. "I have not danced for thirty years."

"But it's quite simple," he explained. "Walk round the room in time with the music, turn when you feel inclined and add any frills you like when we've got into each other's step."

And I *did*. . .

Jean Yarrow I found later, helping him to cut sandwiches and bawling the most unsuitable answers to questions which, poor soul, she could not hear. When he said something about "potted tongue", she thought he said "clot in the lung" and gave him a history of her own complaints which I could not help feeling was *not* suitable for the ears of a young man. . . The duke, meanwhile, was mixing cup by some secret process that he had learned at Cambridge; I hoped it would save the wine a little, but from this point of view it was *not* a success. They only asked for more, like that boy in the book. . .

To use a favourite word of Will's, Colonel Butler was a "superman." But for him. . . I mean, there was plenty of high spirits but not a hint of rowdiness. And he was master of the ceremonies, cook, butler, carriage-finder. The older generation, too, has been so much thrust into the background that we find it refreshing

when a young man shews a little politeness and consideration. As soon as supper was ready—he had prepared it with his own hands—, Colonel Butler asked if he might take me down. Arthur was with me and he at once intervened.

“No, no,” he said. “You’re a dancing man. Go off and find Phyllida. You’ll spoil her evening if you don’t ask her to dance.”

I should have thought it was hardly necessary to *throw* the girl at him like that, but after the way Brackenbury and Ruth had been crying over their lost sheep. . .

“It’s no use your thinking you can keep her for Will,” Arthur said, though I had never uttered a word. “Look at them—meeting. . . And now look at them—dancing. Come down to supper.”

I don’t think that any account of the dance was published in the press. I certainly supplied no particulars. But I expect you read about the dinner. I have been inundated with letters of thanks—the most touching, unquestionably, from the princess, who loved what she called my little informal gathering. It was not quite what I had intended, but the *effect* was good; when our friends saw us together—I mean Arthur and me, of course—harmoniously, lovingly. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

As regards Phyllida and Colonel Butler, you know as much as I do. . . There has been no announcement; and, if people do not wish to tell me things, I do not choose to ask. . .

From every point of view—almost, the evening was highly successful.

But I shall never forgive Spenworth, never. . . As long as I live. . .

X

LADY ANN SPENWORTH IS A PRISONER IN HER OWN HOUSE

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion): You must forgive me for making you wait like this. The servants have positive instructions to say that I am not at home to any one until I have been specifically asked. Why one should be at the mercy of anybody who chooses to burst in. . . When all is said and done, the Englishman's home is still his castle.

Partly I have been busy, partly I have been *very* much worried, partly I have been driven to it in self-defence. I only wish I had been more unyielding before. I told you of the mad clergyman from Morecambe who swept like a whirl-wind into this room, demanding to see my husband and, so far as I can make out, trying to browbeat my boy into marrying his daughter. . . It began from that day, and I find it hard to forgive Arthur for not enlightening me. With Will it was altogether different; no man that *I* should care to meet would try to get out of a difficulty at the expense of a woman. The code forbids that. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

But, if Arthur—who *knew* as soon as there was anything to know—had told me, I should have acted at *once*; we should not be in our present state of absolute uncertainty, simply waiting with folded hands for the next blow to fall. . . Men have a strange idea that certain things are exclusively their *province*; their wives, even the mothers of their children must remain outside the door until it is too late to repair the damage. I was not told the *facts* until two days ago. . .

When my boy was offered that position at Morecambe, I went with him to see that he had a place fit to live in. The Phentons seemed our best hope, they were highly recommended, and I will say ungrudgingly that they played their cards well. An elderly clergyman, who had resigned his benefice on account of ill-health, a decent motherly woman for wife—and these two girls, young, presentable and thoroughly *nice*. . . If you tell me that I am too unready to think ill of people, I have no defence—except to say that I am not prepared to go through life *suspecting*. . . Molly Phenton was very much “the old country parson’s pretty little daughter”; simple, innocent, shy; a little fluttered, you would say, when she heard who we were, and agreeably excited by the prospect of having a good-looking young man to stay in the house. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Perhaps she *overdid* the innocence. Eyes are eyes, and saucers are saucers. . . . But I don't wish to appear wise after the event. I was completely taken in. . . .

And so was Will. She was clever enough to guess that this was the appeal to reach him quickest: the simple little girl with the soft hair and the big grey eyes, living out of the world with her old father, no brothers to protect her or *teach* her anything. One would never have been surprised to find her affecting a lisp. . . . She deliberately laid herself out to catch my boy.

You must not ask me what happened. I have never been forced to study the methods of campaign which a woman adopts for such a purpose. No doubt she tried first of all to attract him innocently. Whatever success she had, poor Will is not free to marry where his heart leads him, unless his heart leads him where there is *some* money (I have always, as you know, dreaded an entanglement with some girl whom he would *simply* have to support all his life); and Will is too honourable to give any encouragement to some one he has no intention of marrying. You will understand me, too, when I say that *no* one could have called it a very suitable alliance—for him or for *her*; it is no kindness to a girl to transport her from her own world, though—poor souls!—they all

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

fancy that, if they can achieve a great match, they will be happy, and the rest will come by the light of nature. Goodness me, have we not seen that tragically disproved with Ruth Brackenbury and Kathleen Spenworth? Will and this girl had *nothing* in common. If she married him, it would be over my dead body. . .

If she did not see this, at least she saw that she was making no impression on my boy; and then I am sadly afraid that she deliberately laid herself out to tempt him. I have seen enough of life to know that, when a woman abandons herself to this kind of thing, very few even of the purest and best are proof against her wiles. This Molly had made up her mind to get a *hold* on Will; and, once she had decided on that, she would stop at nothing.

I never knew a *thing* at the time. When my boy suddenly arrived in London, when the mad clergyman followed him and *insisted* on seeing Arthur, I thought that she would content herself with making him compromise her. If they could be discovered *kissing* . . . as they *were*. . . And that was all that even her father was allowed to know at the time, though she talked about a promise of marriage. But she was clever enough to know that she couldn't make a man marry her because he had kissed her. . .

So far as I can see, there is no doubt at

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

all. . . I did not ask Will, because I could not bear him to tell me an untruth; and the code ordains that a man must never admit such a thing, always the woman must be shielded. One did not need to be his mother in order to see that he was *worried*. Remorse. . . The sense that nothing could ever again be the same. . . *Hatred* of himself. . . *Hatred* of *her*. . . And, all the while, I had to sit with my hands in my lap, seeing his health and happiness ruined. He could not *eat*, he could not *sleep*; Sir Appleton kept writing and telephoning to ask when Will was coming to see him, but there was no question of trying to find fresh *work*. . . And at any moment this wild man of the woods might *descend* upon us again.

The first time he came—I, if you please, was not allowed in the room—, Arthur would only stamp up and down, saying that Will—*our boy*—was a scamp and deserved horse-whipping. I begged for enlightenment, but at this period the wild man only claimed that Will had compromised his Molly and that there had been a promise of marriage. . . *Exactly* what one would have expected! *Precisely* what the girl was working for! *That* was the moment to strike and to strike hard. “A promise of marriage? *Prove* it!” I well knew that Will was too instinctively wise to write her letters

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

—and they were in the same house!—or to give her presents. But I was informed that this was not a woman's province. So we dragged on, waiting for the blow. . .

I quite dreaded the Morecambe post-mark. The girl wrote every other day, and every letter seemed to plunge poor Will into deeper gloom. The code would not let him make a confidant of his mother, but one day I saw one of these letters. It bore no name and opened with a flood of mingled passion and reproach; only when I saw "*Your heart-broken Molly*" at the end did I realize that the letter was intended for Will. She was begging him to come back and talking a great deal about his "promise". . . I should have paid no attention if there had not been other things as well: talk about her "honour" and so on and so forth. . . Her "soul". . . God would never forgive her—the egotism of the girl! . . . Then I felt that, to get a *hold* on Will, she had stopped at nothing. . .

I wonder what you would have done in my place? . . Constant dripping wears away a stone, and this dazing attack would in time have broken down my boy's resistance. Suppose he had *let* himself be blackmailed into marrying her! No money on either side—and Will's *parents* could do nothing to help—, not a taste in common,

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

two people drawn from different worlds. . . And this terrible, *blasting* knowledge that he—and *she*—and *I* had of the girl's character. Ruin, misery lay before them. And *nothing* else. . .

I had to save Will from any temptation to yield. If he could have fallen in love with some nice girl and forgotten the whole episode. . . If I could have sent him *right* away. . . It was not easy, and you know better than any one that my hands have been fairly full. At one time I thought that South American woman was attracted by him, at another my niece Phyllida roused to interest. He was so much preoccupied that he seemed indifferent to women; one after another, they gave him up in despair. Then I bethought me of my second string and cast about in my mind for means to send him far away where he could forget this girl and her importunity. . .

You have met Sir Appleton Deepe in this house. You have met him more than once and you have always been too dear and too discreet to ask, to hint, to raise an eyebrow in mild wonder that I should be *liée* with such a man. *Of his kind* I believe he has no rival. As a mere boy he was sent out to one of the Chinese branches of the business; and by sheer hard work, by studying the natives and learning

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

their requirements he had, before he was forty, built up the trade of his firm to its present gigantic dimensions. Now he is senior partner and a millionaire many times over, with patronage beyond one's wildest dreams. Curious! These "merchant princes" are all the same—never content to stick to their business, always looking for fresh worlds to conquer. I met Sir Appleton—he was plain Mr. Deepe then—in the early days of the war; and, though any *intimacy* was out of the question, I felt that he *was* a man to keep one's eye on for the days when the war would be over and all our boys would be wondering what to do next. He had great ideas then of going into politics—something that Lady Maitland let fall had started the train, and he was convinced that the business man had the world at his feet. (I could not help wondering whether she hoped to exploit him on behalf of that *worthless* youngest boy of hers, the one who evaded military service by *hiding* in one of the government offices.)

"No, Mr. Deepe," I said. "To use one of your own phrases, you have missed your market. The business men have got in before you." And, goodness me, in those days, Whitehall was like a foreign capital! Even the ministers were unheard-of, and every one seemed to be a mining magnate or a shipping magnate

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

or a railway magnate or the keeper of a shop. . . If one had a favour to ask, one quite literally did not know whom to approach. And they were always changing. . . “No, Mr. Deepe,” I said, “some enter society through politics, others enter politics through society; but no man ever rose to the top of the political tree—and stayed there—without backing”. . .

And, so far as I could, I shewed him how it should be done and who were the people he must get to know. *Quite* methodically I set him to work; and I really took a great deal of trouble about him. Connie Maitland has the sublime assurance to pretend that *she* got him his knighthood, but on a point like that Sir Appleton himself is surely the most reliable witness. . . I helped him in a hundred ways; he is quite reasonably well-known now. . .

When the bomb-shell first descended from Morecambe, I thought at once of him. In such a business there must be scores of openings for young men of character and ability, accustomed to command; and, say what you like, the presence of those whom for want of a better word I will call “well-connected” *does* help to lift commerce out of the ruck. . . Unhappily Sir Appleton was abroad at the time, and that was really why we chose Menton, which truly

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

honestly is only a *suburb* of Monte Carlo. The opportunity was too good to be thrown away; and it was worth enduring a little discomfort if by shewing him some slight civility I could enlist his support. It was not so *easy* as I had hoped. He wanted to make me believe that the best positions in the business were reserved for men who had worked their way up from the bottom, as he had done; that there was an immense deal to be learned, that the most responsible part of his duties consisted in choosing the right men. . .

“But,” I said, “I *am* in a position to speak with knowledge here; it is my own son whom I am putting forward.”

“I shall be delighted to see him,” answered Sir Appleton, “and to talk things over again on my return to London.”

And really he wanted to leave it like that, but I am not *quite* so easily discouraged. I hammered away until I had extracted a definite promise that he would find *some* position in which Will could support himself, though I am afraid he was not very gracious about it. . .

“If I accept him in the dark,” he said in conclusion, “don’t blame me for discharging him after a month if I find he’s no good.”

“I have no fear of that,” I said.

“Discharge” was hardly the word I should

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

have chosen, but one is foolish to expect too great nicety of language. . . .

It was arranged that Sir Appleton should dine with us here to meet Will.

I did *try* to impress on my boy that this would be one of the most momentous days of his life. I wanted Sir Appleton to see him at his best. When you have no experience, no technical knowledge to offer, it is so important that character, personality, breeding. . . I am sure you understand what I mean. And I could never forget that, when the Jew man—Sir Adolf Erckmann or whatever he *now* calls himself—pretended to have an appointment ready and waiting, Will endangered his prospects by participating in some ridiculous game that caused our worthy host to take offence. One had not looked for such sensitiveness in *that* quarter; but, when a man is uncertain of himself and takes refuge in his dignity, high spirits and irresponsibility have no place. *This* time, I told Will, he must run *no* risks. And, after that, I hoped—and *expected*—to see my boy taking our friend by *storm*. . . .

Do you know, it was as much as I could do to prevail on him to meet Sir Appleton at all! This *menace* was preying on his nerves; this pitiless hail of appealing letters from his “heart-broken Molly”. One day he came in looking

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

as if he had seen a ghost. This girl had dared to call for him at his club! I am thankful to say that he kept his head and refused resolutely to see her, but we never imagined that she was in London. . . And we both knew that we should now never be safe even in our own house. She had not dared to face *me*; perhaps she made a good guess what kind of reception I should feel it my duty to give her; she was clever enough to know that a woman would see through her in a moment. . . But she would make for Will the moment she thought my back was turned. . .

It was then that I gave those orders to the servants. There had been one or two cases in the papers, you may remember, of people who called on chance and walked off with whatever they could lay their hands on. I made this the text for my little homily. And it was not a moment too soon! The girl called that same afternoon and asked to see my boy. . .

She called daily, refusing to take "no" for an answer. Mr. William Spensworth not at home? When *would* he be home? . . . But for this dinner to Sir Appleton, I should have insisted on sending Will *right* away, but I *had* to hold my hand until the Chinese appointment had been arranged. The servants were instructed to say that they did not know. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

And, after that, I knew it was only a question of time before she encamped on the pavement at sunrise and *stayed* there. . . Can you *imagine* a more intolerable situation? Always having to peep round the curtain to see whether it was safe to *venture* into the street?

One day she forced her way into the house. It was the afternoon before Sir Appleton came to dine; and Will, who had been sleeping—on my suggestion—at his club, arrived in time to dress. Hardly had the door shut behind him when this girl (you would have thought she had more pride!) rang the bell and put her unvarying question. Mr. William Spenworth was not at home. Oh, but he *was*! She had just seen him come in! (An altercation with a servant on some one else's door-step!) Norden behaved with perfect discretion, asking her to take a seat while he made enquiries. After a moment he returned to say—once more—that Mr. William was not at home. The girl, from his account, was in two minds whether to search the house, but at *last* she consented to go.

I am not a nervous woman, as you are aware, but I was *thoroughly* upset. A worse prelude to a *momentous* meeting could hardly be imagined. Will was quite unstrung by the persecution; and, though I never encourage

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

him to drink between meals, I said nothing when he helped himself to brandy. He *needed* it. . .

“Son of mine, we must *rally*,” I said.
“She *must* see, after this—”

“I shall go off my head if this goes on any longer,” he said.

Utterly unnerved. . .

I had thought it better to send Arthur off to his club for dinner. To my mind, it is inconceivable that a father should be jealous of his own son, but I can think of no other way to explain my husband's persistent attitude of disparagement whenever a united front is most necessary. “A policy of pin-pricks” was the phrase that my boy once coined for it. We are, I hope, a devoted family, but Arthur seems *never* to lose an opportunity of indulging in a sneer. . . Yet I wish we had had him with us that night. In a crisis I am only too well aware that *I* am always left to find a way out, but that night I felt hardly adequate even to ordinary conversation; and, when this Sir Appleton began to shew the cloven hoof, I knew that only a man could deal with him.

We were taken utterly off our guard. He came into the room, shook hands with me, bowed to Will, waited until Norden was out of the room and then said :

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“There’s a lady downstairs who wants to see one of you for a moment. She was on the doorstep, when I arrived, and your servants didn’t want to admit her. I gathered, however, that she’d been waiting for some time, so I made them let her in.”

Made. . . In the school in which I was brought up, the bare idea of giving orders to other people’s servants. . . I do not know whether you have been forced into contact with the world of “business men”, but I find their autocracy sometimes a little trying.

“A lady to see me?,” I said. “Really, this is *not* a reasonable time for calling.”

“I fancy it was your son, Lady Ann, that she asked for,” said Sir Appleton.

“Oh, I can’t be bothered to see people at this hour of the night,” said Will.

When Norden came in to announce dinner, I told him to explain that neither Will nor I could possibly desert our guest to talk to this girl at such a time. . .

“Oh, don’t mind me,” said Sir Appleton.

“But I do!,” I said. “And I mind about dinner.”

“I should be disposed to see her,” said he. “Perhaps she’s in trouble.”

“It’ll keep till to-morrow,” said Will.

There was nothing so very heartless either

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

in the words or in the tone, but for some reason Sir Appleton chose to take offence.

“That’s not a very sympathetic line to take with some one who may be in great distress,” he said. “For all you know, she’s some girl friend of yours who’s stranded in London without money. If you’ll allow me to say so, Lady Ann, I think one of you should see her. It need not take more than a moment.”

I fancied that I knew better. . .

“Norden can find out what the matter is while we’re at dinner,” I said. “You’ll agree that it is not a very reasonable hour for calling.”

“Which is what makes me think that her business is urgent,” said Sir Appleton. “If you don’t want to be bothered, will you allow *me* to interview her? If it’s only a five-pound note she wants because she’s lost her purse. . .”

What could one say? Obviously he should not have *made* such a suggestion, but, as obviously, I could not forbid him. It seemed fair to assume that she would not incriminate herself with a total stranger or try to blackmail us through him. . . And he had an assurance of manner which led me to hope that he would not stand any nonsense from her. . .

“Try—by all means,” I said.

And it was on the tip of my tongue to beg him not to consider us; *we* could await his

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

pleasure before thinking about dinner. But one had to be civil to the man for this one night.

He was gone for nearly half an hour. Will and I waited and waited. . . At last he came back and said :

“I must apologize for keeping you so long. It was a complicated story.” Then he looked at Will. “I should like a word with you afterwards.”

The agony of that dinner is a thing which I shall never forget. Sir Appleton sat in dead silence for half the meal, then roused himself to talk about red lacquer. That was his nearest approach to China, business. . . And, when we were alone, he turned to Will and said :

“How much does your mother know about it?”

“About what?,” Will asked, naturally enough.

“Now don’t try that kind of thing on *me*, young man!,” cried Sir Appleton in a quite unpardonable tone.

And then, *for the first time*, I heard the facts about this girl’s unhappy condition. Will, apparently, knew, but she had not told her father or Arthur or anybody but Sir Appleton. And how much of it was true. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“You are accepting this girl’s tale?,” I asked.

“I believe her.”

“Without a shadow of evidence? If Will assured you—”

“I shouldn’t believe him,” he interrupted.

To Will’s mother, in her own house, at her own table! I could see that this was going to be war to the knife. . .

And then I’m afraid I threw all restraint to the winds. After urging Will to be careful, too. What I said. . . The words poured out of me in a torrent until my boy stared at me with round eyes. Sir Appleton just sat nodding like a mandarin. I told him how this girl had set her trap to catch Will, how she had evidently resolved to stop at *nothing* for the chance of marrying above her station, how she had persecuted and blackmailed us. Whatever she had got, I said, she richly deserved. Not that I believed her story! Oh, not for a single moment! As soon as she had *forced* Will to marry her, she would laugh in his face for the trick she had played him. And, if all this was true—her condition and so forth and so on—, what possible proof was there that Will was in any way responsible?

“Ask him,” said Sir Appleton.

“How should *I* know?,” said Will.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“Exactly,” Sir Appleton cried in triumph. “Now, young man, what do you propose to do?”

“I don’t know,” said Will.

“Then suppose you find out,” said Sir Appleton. “Are you going to marry her?”

“No, no!,” I cried. “A thousand times, no! She must reap what she has sown. My son shall not pay the price of her wickedness.”

“He promised to marry her,” said Sir Appleton.

“Prove it,” I said.

Oh, if only I had been allowed to see the mad old father and challenge him! We should have heard *very* little more of Miss Molly Wanton. Sir Appleton didn’t seem to care whether he could prove it or not. . .

“Oh,” he had to admit, “there’s no *proof*. But she says so, and I believe her. Most of my life, Lady Ann, I’ve had to form quick judgements of people and, perhaps three times out of seven, I know when they’re speaking the truth. Your son *did* promise.”

“He did *not*!,” I retorted. “It stands to reason. . .”

And then I tried to *hammer* a little sense into his head. Two people drawn from different worlds, without an interest in common, without money. All his life she would drag him down

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

and down. . . How would he like to see a son of *his* in such a position? . . .

“He should have thought of that before he began playing the fool,” said Sir Appleton.

“Before *he* began playing the fool! A woman knows well enough. . . And a *clergyman’s* daughter! You want my boy to marry her with his knowledge, *our* knowledge of her character? You must be mad!”

Will said nothing. This quite *unseemly* altercation, when he was already worn out with the long persecution. . . I wished, oh! I *wished* that Arthur had been dining at home; *he* would never have allowed us to be bullied like this. . .

“Let’s take the next thing, then,” proposed Sir Appleton. And, do you know, I felt that he was *enjoying* our agony. “Your son is too fine a gentleman to marry this frail beauty, though he was not so fastidious when there was a question of getting her into trouble.” Fine gentlemen and frail beauties! The man was talking like a character in some ridiculous melodrama! “Well, he has rather spoiled her for any other life, so I presume he will gladly pay what compensation he can. Even a court of law would award substantial damages, if she could prove that there had been a promise of marriage.”

“She can’t prove it,” I said.

“And I’m sure you would not like her to try,” he retorted with quite an undisguised threat in his voice. “It would cause an ugly scandal, and you would all gladly pay ten times whatever damages a jury would give her for the sake of hushing up the scandal. Are you prepared to give her enough to go abroad and, if need be, live abroad and make a new life for herself?”

“I’ve no doubt we shall do what we can,” I said, “if the story’s true—which I don’t for one moment admit at present.”

I was *thankful* that he no longer suggested that Will should marry her. . . I’d have promised anything! Though why *he* should make himself a ruler and a judge. . .

“You will have to provide for her,” he said, “at least as generously as if she were marrying your son. She will have no chance of participating in his prosperity and success as he rises from triumph to triumph in his career.”

I *thought* I detected a sneer in his voice. If I had been sure, I would have suggested that he ceased insulting my son until we were both free of the obligation to treat a *guest* with courtesy. The face was curiously expressionless; I couldn’t be certain.

“You must not judge every one by your

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

own standard of wealth," I pointed out. "We are very far from rich."

"You would settle, say, five thousand a year on her?," he proposed. "The cost of living has reduced that to little more than three thousand by the standard of prices before the war."

"Sir Appleton," I said as patiently as I could, "if we had five thousand a year to throw about, we should not be inviting your generous assistance in finding a position for Will."

It was *more* than time to dismiss this girl and get to *business*. . .

"Five hundred, then," he suggested.

"A *year*? For all her life?," I asked, hardly believing my ears. If he could have had any conception what Arthur allows me to dress on. . .

"Your son's costly regard will affect the whole of her life," said Sir Appleton.

"I won't go into that," I said. "I admit nothing. But I *can* tell you that it would be out of the question."

"Fifty pounds then?," he went on remorselessly. "It's less than a pound a week—with present purchasing power of about a shilling a day."

"I don't think we need discuss this," I said. "If the story's true, this girl will find that we shall not behave illiberally to her. I don't admit

any claim; I was brought up in a stern school which ordained that a woman should reap as she had sown. What you regard as her misfortune, I was taught to consider the divine, just punishment of sin."

Sir Appleton looked at his watch and rose to his feet.

"But you'll pay her a lump sum of a hundred," he suggested, "to prevent a scandal and help her through her troubles and keep her from jumping into the river?"

"I hope she would not be so foolish or wicked as to contemplate such a thing," I told him, "but I would certainly pay her that."

"Then it's right that she should know as soon as possible," said he. "I told her to go round to my house so that my wife could look after her. She dare not face her father; and she was growing rather miserable in lodgings. If you will excuse me, I should like just to explain how the land lies and how much she can hope from your—generosity."

Will opened the door. . . I can see now that I should have done better to say *nothing*, but I could not let him slip away without a *word* on the one subject which had made me ask him ! . . and *submit* to his company. . .

"And when," I asked, "may we hope to hear about the appointment?"

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“The appointment?,” he repeated.

“The opening you *promised* to find for Will,” I reminded him.

“Did I promise?,” he asked stupidly; and then with deliberate malice, “Can you *prove* that there was ever a promise?”

I reminded him of our talks at Menton. Goodness me, the man had dined for the express purpose of meeting Will and deciding what kind of work would suit him best.

“We have to make our plans,” I explained.

“I don’t think we need discuss this,” he said. “Your son, as you told me, has no experience or technical knowledge, so that, if I employed him at all, I should employ him for his qualities of character. I should not dream of judging any man on a single meeting, so I think we had better postpone a decision until I have had better opportunity of studying his honour and generosity.”

And that is how we stand at present. . .

Will thinks that there is nothing to hope for in *that* quarter, but I cannot believe that, when a man has given a solemn promise, he will try to wriggle out of it. Sir Appleton owes a good deal to me; but for my advice and really *untiring* pains he would still be plain Mr. Deepe, unknown to any one outside his business. . .

Of the girl we have heard nothing for two

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

days. If she *must* live on some one else's doorstep, I should be thankful to know that she had transferred herself to his. . .

But our existence is like life in a beleaguered city, never knowing when the next attack will be delivered. . .

XI

LADY ANN SPENWORTH FINDS HER HEART WARMING

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion) :
Indeed I think I may claim that you have come to the right person. I returned from the Hall only this morning, so I am well primed with news.

And very, very happy. It is only since I have been established once more in the beleaguered city that I have had to remember this menace. No! Not a word or sign! The old clergyman descended on us from Morecambe, protesting that my boy Will had promised to marry his daughter; the daughter came and told a cock-and-bull story which proved her own abandonment without establishing anything against my boy; and, since then, nothing! But one does not choose to be a standing target for that sort of thing. When next Miss Molly Phenton (or Wanton) comes to Mount Street, she may find that Will is safely married to some one else or that I have sent him abroad. I have lost the thread. . . Ah, yes, the great

romance! In that atmosphere of radiance one forgot one's troubles. . .

My brother Brackenbury did indeed lend me the house for a few weeks in the summer—when every one was away in Scotland—, but otherwise I have not passed a night there on their invitation since that deplorable week-end when all the trouble with Phyllida began. You have forgotten it! I hope now that every one will forget it. Hilary—Colonel Butler, you know—had fallen in love with my niece while he was in her hospital. As Phyllida was living with me at the time, I had a duty to my brother, so I suggested that this boy should be invited to the Hall “on approval”, as Will would say. I yield to no one in my *real* affection for dear Hilary, but—why disguise it?—he had been brought up simply—on modest means—, and it was only right that he should see Phyllida in her natural frame and decide for himself whether he could support her and live up to it. Most people so notoriously *cannot*: my sister-in-law Ruth, who remains and will ever remain the purse-proud shipping magnate's daughter. . . I was more than justified. Hilary consulted me; and, though I will never take the responsibility of advising young people in love, he was grateful for the detachment of an outsider. *I*, he could see, had no axe to grind. . . Brackenbury and

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Ruth received him effusively; my nephew Culroyd took him to his heart; if he had proposed, he would have been accepted then and there. He had done too wonderfully in the war and, in my humble judgement, gave a promise of success in any career he might undertake.

Me he consulted to know whether the world would say that he had married Phyllida for her money. He was daunted, I could see, by the *lavishness* of the Hall: the size of the house, the number of servants, Phyllida's four hunters—and so forth and so on. I told him that, *in this respect of money and—in—this—respect—alone*, he was not in fact contributing very much. He nodded, packed his bag and went off to *make* money—with an enterprise and a resolution that was too splendid. Did I ever tell you that I once detected him driving a motor-cab? He has now formed a company and is doing very well indeed. It was quite romantic! I always knew that there *were* such men in England and I was proud to meet one.

He begged me not to enlighten Phyllida, as he wished to leave her entirely free. Which I thought a most proper attitude, not extravagantly common in the youth of the present day. In my efforts to help him I exposed myself to

an *unhappy* misconception, for Phyllida persuaded first herself and then the family that I had scotched her romance with some crazy idea of securing her for my boy Will. It was always on the tip of my tongue to say that she seemed very certain of him. Goodness me, if Will had *wanted* her. . . I have never wholly approved of cousin-marriages; and I looked with something like dismay on their growing intimacy. That was later, of course; at first she was like a demented creature, saying the wildest and wickedest things. Do you know that she charged me with trying to keep my brother-in-law from getting a divorce—so that there should be no possibility of an heir, so that in time Arthur or Will should inherit Cheniston and the title? These are not the fancies of a *balanced* mind, and it was then that I urged Brackenbury to send her *right* away. Failing that, I asked him to entrust her to me for a while in the hopes that I might turn her thoughts. Her loyalty to Colonel Butler I *admired*, but there is a danger that love may develop into an obsession. . .

That was the time when I became so nervous about Will. *She* was listless and unhappy, *he* was sympathetic; a dangerous combination! They had actually, I believe, reached what is called an understanding, when Phyllida learned

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

by chance that Colonel Butler was alive and working in London; and this, I am thankful to say, turned her attention from Will. You were not present, I think, at the great meeting? No, I remember you were away; it was one night when the princess honoured me by dining to meet a few old friends. I gave a little impromptu dance afterwards to some of the officers in Spenworth's old regiment, not remembering that Hilary Butler was of the number; Phyllida was dining, and they met. . .

After that, it was a foregone conclusion. Every day when I opened my letters or looked at the paper, I expected to read the announcement. You may judge of my misgivings when my sister-in-law Ruth invited me most urgently to come for the week-end to the Hall and to bring Will with me. I have told you that there was *some* sort of understanding: if Hilary disappeared from human ken, Phyllida would marry Will—something of that kind; she was such a little picture of misery that, if *some* one had not shewn her a little kindness, I truly honestly believe that she would have wilted away. I was in dread that she would come up and say: "Aunt Ann, Will and I are going to be married". . . *That* is why I searched the "Times" so diligently. . . It would be a suitable marriage in some ways: she

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

has money. . . But I could never regard it as satisfactory.

The moment I could get a word alone with my sister-in-law, I asked her whether they had seen anything of Colonel Butler.

“Not since you arranged that meeting at your house,” Ruth told me, “but he is due here to-night.” She persists in speaking of people as though they were ships! The Hull strain coming out! “That is why I invited you all—Culroyd and Hilda are coming; and Spensworth and his wife—; I wanted you all to meet him. Or rather Phyllida did. She has been very mysterious, but there seems to be no doubt now. . .”

“They are going to be married?,” I interrupted.

“Nothing has been said about it—*yet*,” answered Ruth.

I know you will not misunderstand me, still less make mischief, if I tell you that I heaved a *sigh* of relief. Fond as I am of Phyllida, she would not have made a very suitable wife for Will, though it is essential for him to marry some one with a *little* money and I have felt lately that, if he could marry *any one*, it would put an end to this persecution from the girl who is trying to blackmail him. . . At the same time it seemed a little strange for Phyllida to

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

be summoning the *entire* family, when, so far as I could make out, Hilary had not said a word. . . .

“So you are expecting Colonel Butler,” I said to her at tea.

“He’s coming to-day,” she answered rather brusquely. “I thought he might have been here by now. . . . *Well*, Aunt Ann, was I wise to wait? You told me to go right away and forget him; you always said you wanted to turn my thoughts.”

Do you know, for a dreadful moment I fancied that she was trying to reopen her insane vendetta. . . . When she circulated those truly *wicked* stories about me. . . .

“Dear Phyllida,” I said, “did I ever try to shake your faith in him? No one, not even you, has a greater admiration or regard for Colonel Butler; he has done me more than one inestimable service, and I think he would be the first to admit that he owes something to my friendship and advice. Ask him, dear child! I have nothing to fear from his testimony; but there is a right way and a wrong way in most things, and he will tell you that, on my advice, he chose the right. If I urged your father to send you away, if I tried to the best of my poor abilities to distract your thoughts, it was because I could not bear to

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

see my own niece, my own brother's child, the picture of misery that you were."

"Well, you'd look miserable," said Phyllida, "if the one person you cared for had been set against you and if everybody said you'd tried to capture him and he'd run away."

Who it was that Phyllida imagined she was quoting I have really no idea. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her that, if a girl conducts a love affair quite so ostentatiously as she had done, she must not be surprised if people ask questions when, all of a sudden, nothing comes of it. It was hardly the moment to talk about ostentation, however. You remember the terrace at the Hall; we were sitting there like people in the first row of the stalls, waiting for the curtain to go up—Brackenbury, Ruth, their boy Culroyd and Hilda, his wife, my brother-in-law Spenworth, *his* new wife, Arthur, Will and myself. I really pitied any poor young man with such an audience to face. . . .

"But all has now turned out well?," I asked. "Dear Phyllida, I am very, very glad."

"Oh, don't congratulate me yet," she said. "He hasn't *said* anything."

I was really *amazed*. . . .

"I thought perhaps that, when you met at my house—," I began.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

After all, *if*—as I hope—everything goes well, I am entitled to a *little* credit. . .

“Oh, not a word!” said Phyllida. “He wouldn’t even dance with me at first. I said: ‘Are you trying to avoid me?’ He said: ‘Yes.’ . . . And I could have died till I saw he was only joking. Then we both laughed. Then he said: ‘Would your mother invite me down to the Hall one week-end soon? It’s only fair to warn her that, if she doesn’t, I shall invite myself.’ ‘And, if you don’t invite yourself, I shall invite you,’ I told him. ‘Don’t let’s say anything at present,’ he said; ‘I’ve been very busy since I saw you last, but I shall be free in a week or two.’ He wired on Wednesday to know if he might come. I knew you would like to meet him and to see that my faith was justified.”

“Dear Phyllida,” I said. “I hope indeed that it has been.”

“If he doesn’t propose to me,” answered Phyllida, “I shall propose to him. I always told you I would.”

Of course, I am old-fashioned; I was brought up in a different school. Do you know, even in jest, between the two of us, that kind of speech is always very distasteful to me. . .

Apparently the young man was motoring

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

from London, and there was some sort of idea that he would arrive in time for tea. We maintained our absurd theatrical postures until the terrace became too unbearably cold. When I went up to dress, he had not arrived; but Phyllida was still sitting with her gaze fixed down the drive to the white gates of the lodge. . . It may have been love; but I could not help feeling that she was *very* conscious of the *effect*. . .

When I came down at half-past eight, there was still no sign of him. And then you can imagine the inevitable discussion! Was he coming or was he not? Should we wait or should we begin without him? Phyllida expressed no opinion; she sat by herself, waiting. . . At nine o'clock I took Arthur and Will on one side and told them that we must really make a concerted attack on Ruth; I was *famished*. . .

“He *can't* be coming,” I said.

Unfortunately Phyllida overheard me and interpreted this as an attack on Colonel Butler's good faith. . .

“He *said* he would come,” she persisted. Over one shoulder, you know. . . With a toss of the head.

“Perhaps the car has broken down,” I suggested. “There may have been an accident.”

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“He will come,” said Phyllida.

At a quarter past nine Ruth was merciful enough to allow her guests to have a little food—one of those meals where, as my boy said very wittily, “everything was cold except the ice.” A hideous dinner! I am not now referring to the food, but to the atmosphere. Phyllida refused to come in; Brackenbury wavered and wobbled, now going out to her, now coming back. . . . And the one *not* very interesting topic of conversation: what had happened to Colonel Butler. By ten o’clock *most* of us had made up our minds that he was not coming. . . .

By eleven I really believe some were wondering whether he had ever *intended* to come. He had invited himself, it is true. Or so we were told. But it really seemed as though the initiative came from Phyllida, that she might be forcing his hand, that he had suggested coming really as a means of ending the discussion at my dance. *I* did not know what letters had passed between them since. She might have been pressing and pressing him until he at last consented to come; then he may have seen that, once at the Hall, he would not be allowed to escape a second time. He may have invited himself with the reservation that he would stop away at the last moment and say that he had

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

been called abroad. Phyllida is *attractive*, she is rich; for people who care about these things, she is the daughter of an earl. Undeniably young Butler had been glamoured by it all at first; but he may well have felt on reconsideration that it would not be a very suitable match, and I have yet to learn that a man thinks more highly of a girl because she throws herself at his head. That is a lesson which the rising generation will have to learn—at a heavy price.

I felt that some such thoughts must be passing through Spenworth's mind every time he said: "The fellow's not coming to-night. Can't some one persuade that child to have some food instead of giving herself a chill?" Brackenbury and Ruth, too, were beginning to doubt and to look very much concerned. If the young man *had* sheered off, they would never forgive themselves for allowing the unhappy girl to make such an exhibition of herself. . . In my heart of hearts I knew that Colonel Butler could be trusted as I would trust my own son. I was only afraid that there might have been an *accident*. . .

And I could fancy what poor Phyllida's feelings must be after assembling all the family to meet her soldier-hero, after telling me at the top of her *very* clear little voice that, if he did not propose to her, she would propose to him.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

. . . Every one would say that he had run away and she had dragged him back and now he had run away again. . .

At half-past eleven we gave up hope.

“He can’t be coming to-night,” Ruth told Phyllida. “Let’s all go to bed; we shall hear something in the morning.”

“He *said* he would come,” Phyllida answered.

There was another aimless discussion when we were all so tired that we could hardly keep our eyes open. Brackenbury went out to see what *he* could do with the girl—and returned to say that she had vanished!

Oh, my dear! Our *feelings* I leave you to imagine. In some directions Phyllida has a wild, insane pride . . . and she had seen it dragged in the mire before the eyes of us all. When I spoke of love degenerating into obsession, I chose my words with care: for months the child had been so *distraught* that I felt a *very* little more might upset her reason. Rapidly reviewing all that had passed that day, I recalled the utter desperation of her behaviour—the ruined gambler’s last throw. . . We stood as though we had been carved out of stone, *staring* at Brackenbury while he *stared* at us . . . white as paper.

He was thinking of the river. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

We seemed unable to move. . .

At last Spenworth hurled himself through the door, with Brackenbury, Culroyd, Arthur, goodness knows who at his heels. I caught Will's arm and went with him on to the terrace; it was time that *some one* kept his head. Do you know, I had a premonition: a moonless night, that inky river, demented, shouting men jostling one another on the bank and in the water, plunging and splashing, a cry for help, some one caught in the reeds, two—three tragedies instead of one. . .

"The boat-house, Will," I urged.

We dashed along the terrace and across the lawn. Suddenly I stopped. Ahead of me—in the darkness I could not see how far—there was a flash of white. It vanished, appeared again, vanished again.

"*This way,*" I said.

And I could have sobbed aloud. Instead of making for the river, poor Phyllida was roaming distractedly towards the lodge. We heard her feet stumbling on and off the gravel, there came the moan of a tortured animal. . . The footsteps ceased abruptly, the white coat vanished. . . She had left the drive and turned away behind a clump of laurel. I heard her crying as though her heart would break. . .

"I can run no farther," I said to Will.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“ And an old woman like me is no good to her now. Go to her and comfort her. You have always loved her, so you will know what to say. If she breaks her heart, she will break yours too ; you will never forgive yourself for abandoning her. Let her see that, however lonely and deserted she may feel, one staunch friend is true to her through all things. It is your right and privilege to share her sorrow and, if may be, to assuage it.”

At such a time my boy did not need to be told twice. As I sank exhausted against a tree, he stole forward ; I heard him calling her softly by name. If I could, I would have hurried out of ear-shot, for whatever he said was sacred to the two of them ; but I expected every moment to faint with my unaccustomed exertion. . .

“ Phyllida. . . Darling Phyllida,” he began.

I do not mind telling *you*, because you are always discreet and, when reverence is demanded, you will be reverent. . . I thought I knew my boy, but there are depths of tenderness in a man which he never shews to his own mother. . .

“ Phyllida, darling Phyllida, won't you let me comfort you? If you break your heart, you will break mine too. You know that I have always loved you, and that gives me the right to comfort you when you are unhappy. What-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

ever other people may do to you or say to you, I am always here for you to turn to. . .”

I cannot go on. . . Already I have said more than I ought. Will you think your old friend very foolish if she confesses that for a moment she forgot that she *was* old? Time slipped from my shoulders, and I saw once again a young girl in that very garden, not a hundred yards from where I was standing. . . Dear Phyllida, I suppose, would think her a very funny, old-fashioned creature, but I did not seem so then—certainly to Arthur. . . A young girl in a white dress with a young man pleading at her feet until his voice broke and he said: “It’s no good, I can’t go on.” And then he threw his arms about me. . . And I remember my dear father coming on to the terrace and calling out to me. And Arthur seized my hand and *strode* forward with his head among the *stars*. . . Brackenbury—he is fourteen years my junior—was already in bed, but we insisted on going upstairs to tell him the news. Life was a very glorious thing that night. I walked on air; and, if any one had told me that it was a thing of greed and cruelty and ingratitude and mean passions, I should have laughed him to scorn. . .

Forgive me. . .

I am sentimental, no doubt, but if we *have* the opportunity of feeling our heart warming.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

. . . Of late years. . . I have lost the thread. . . Ah, yes! I crept away, leaving them together, with the murmur of my boy's divine sympathy still in my ears. At first I walked aimlessly, trying to keep my mind *blank* until I was competent to think of anything. What *would* happen now? . . . In time I found myself on the lawn once more, and the sight of the river reminded me of duty still left undone. I had to find Brackenbury and tell him that his child was safe and in good hands. . . I remember wondering, trying to make up my mind what I should think if this *crise* shewed Phyllida that it was Will she wanted to marry. . .

There was no one in sight. I walked cautiously to the river, expecting every moment to step over the edge. . . No sound of voices. I called: "Brackenbury!", "Arthur!", "Culroyd!". There was no answer. Do you know that quite unreasoning fear that sometimes overtakes one when one is in the dark and knows that one is not *alone*? And the river—like a looking-glass in a twilit room. . . I have a horror of any great expanse of water at night; it is so silent and merciless. "Culroyd! Brackenbury! Spenworth!", I called again—this time at the top of my voice. And then I am not ashamed to confess that I hurried back to the house as fast as my legs would carry me.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

It was no less deserted than the garden! Lights blazing, doors and windows open, but not a soul in sight; the very servants pressed into the hue-and-cry. I wandered through room after room, upstairs and down. When I went back to the terrace, it was with the crazy feeling that the world had come to an end and I alone was left. . . Suddenly a step on the gravel! And I do assure you that I did not know whether to scream with fear or sob with relief.

“Lady Ann!”

I was *far* beyond recognizing voices. I *peered* into the darkness until the figure of a man emerged from the shadows. . .

“Colonel Butler!,” I cried.

“Where’s Phyllida?,” he asked.

“Goodness me, what have you been doing to yourself?,” I exclaimed.

His clothes were in *rags*, he had lost his hat, he was plastered in mud from head to foot, and one arm was in some sort of make-shift sling.

“Oh, that’s nothing,” he said. “A fool of a girl was riding a horse she couldn’t control, and, in trying not to run her down, I had to turn the car over an embankment. There was no station within reach, so I had to come here across country. I’d have wired; but, by the time I reached a telegraph-office, everything was closed—”

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“But have you had no dinner?,” I asked, remembering our own fate.

“I don’t want any dinner till I know what’s happened to Phyllida. When did she disappear? Lord Brackenbury says she was out here one moment. . . If anything’s happened to her—”

“Calm yourself, Colonel Butler,” I enjoined.

Indeed I might as profitably have addressed the advice to myself. It was time for some one to keep his head. I was thinking only of Phyllida and the effect that *another* shock might have upon her. She was already so much overwrought, sobbing her heart out when any of us could have told her that there was *nothing* to cry about. . .

“We’ve been searching high and low,” said Colonel Butler. “Lord Brackenbury told me that she suddenly bolted into the night. We haven’t dared shout for fear of frightening her away. . . What’s it all about? In the name of God, what can have happened to her?”

“If you stay here,” I said, “I will find her for you.”

“But do you know where she is?,” he cried in great excitement. “I must come too.”

“Won’t you trust my judgement, Colonel Butler?,” I asked.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

He hesitated for a moment and then said :

“Of course I will. You’ve been a jolly good friend to me. But for pity’s sake go at once; I can’t stand much more.”

“If you know where the others are,” I suggested, “you might employ your time in finding them.”

Then I set off down the drive once more. I walked on the grass, but, on reaching the laurel-clump, I gave a little cough to apprise them of my presence. Poor Phyllida was so much overwrought that she started to her feet like a frightened animal. (She had been lying with her face in her arms, while Will stroked her hair and whispered such little words of comfort as came into his head.)

“Will, I want to speak to you a moment,” I said.

And, when he came to me, I told him to go down to the lodge gates and wait there till I fetched him. Then I tried to make *some* impression on poor Phyllida, who was indulging in such an abandonment of grief that you would really say that she was enjoying it.

“Phyllida, stop crying,” I said, “and listen to what I have to tell you.”

“Oh, why can’t you leave me alone?,” she sobbed.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

“Because,” I said, “there is great and glorious news for you, and your old aunt is selfish enough to wish to be its bearer.”

You may be sure that she stopped her crying soon enough at that.

I told her that Hilary Butler had arrived. . . And about the accident; she tried to bolt from my grasp, but I contrived to restrain her. . . And the dreadful fright she had been wicked enough to give us. . .

“Oh, let me go!,” she kept crying.

“A moment more, dearest child,” I said. “You are both over-excited, overwrought. Would you not like to meet him alone first, without feeling that the eyes of all your family are upon you?” . . .

She is an impetuous, affectionate little thing. In a moment she was kissing me and making my face quite wet with her tears. . .

“We will go into the rose-garden,” I said. “Many years before you were born, dear Phyllida, another girl stood there with the man who loved her more than any one in the world. May you be at least not less happy than she has been!” . . .

Then I returned to the house. Hilary had collected most of the party, and I whispered to him that he would find Phyllida by the sun-dial. . . I am not so well used to praise from my

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

occasionally critical relations that I can afford to treat it lightly; Spenworth was good enough to propose three cheers for me when he heard of my *childishly* simple little stratagem for letting the young people meet unlistened to, unspied on. . .

“And now had not the rest of us better go to bed?,” I suggested to Ruth. “If all is as we hope, you and Brackenbury would sooner not be embarrassed by our presence.”

Poor Ruth is consistent in one thing: she never shews any instinct for *arranging* or *managing*. It is perhaps not to be expected that she should take to it by the light of nature, but one would have thought that the first ambition of any woman who had been transported from one *milieu* to another would have been to *learn*. . . She is in a position of authority. . .

When they had all separated to their rooms, I once more set out. . . Will, I think, had guessed; and I have never seen any one more delighted.

“I knew the fellow would turn up,” he said, “but I couldn’t make poor little Phyl see it. I suppose she thought he *must* have killed himself on the road. Just as well he didn’t, because I believe she’s quite fond of him. I should think they’d get on quite well to-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

gether, though of course she's not everybody's money."

I explained to him that every one had gone to bed, but here he was *quite* immovable.

"I want to be the first to congratulate them," he said.

Which I thought was *handsome*, when you remember how Phyllida threw herself at his head.

They are to be married as soon as Hilary's company has been formed. He is very anxious that Arthur should join the board, but I am not sure that it is wise to undertake *too* many enterprises. One is always reluctant to refuse what is really a tempting offer—on a small scale—, but there *are* only twenty-four hours in the day. . . .

One quite rubs one's eyes when the younger generation knocks at the door in this way. How old would you say Phyllida was? Twenty-two, I assure you; and I know what I am talking about. It will be my boy's turn next, I suppose; he is nearly thirty-one. And, though I do not want to lose him, I shall not be sorry to see him *safely* married.

I hope that Phyllida will make a success of her life. I have every reason to think she will, but I refuse to accept any responsibility for guiding young people to their affinities. After

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

one irrational period in which I was the wicked stepmother, I suddenly find myself regarded as the good fairy. . .

It is really too ridiculous. . .

Oh, I think you can congratulate them at once. They are to be "Morning-Posted", as Will would say, to-morrow. . .

XII

LADY ANN SPENWORTH DEFENDS HER CONSISTENCY

LADY ANN (to a friend of proved discretion) :
Consistency?

It is very easy, of course, to *overdo* that sort of thing, to become so inflexible that one is the slave and victim of one's own rules. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. . . On the other hand, I have no patience with the people who say one thing to-day and another to-morrow, so that you never know where you are with them. Surely the wise course is to discover the great laws and hold to them unswervingly, only stepping aside by a hair's breadth to left or right when the great laws quite obviously apply no longer. In the realm of principle I admit no compromise; Right is Right, and Wrong is Wrong, and no amount of special pleading can blur *that* distinction. . .

But, though I hold no *brief* for consistency, I should be vastly entertained to know exactly where you think I have been inconsistent. . . Not you personally, of course! We have known each other long enough to look out on life with

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

very much the same eyes. But the people who are good enough to criticize me without, perhaps, taking the trouble to ascertain even the facts of the case.

I have always said that I would not stir a finger to interfere with my boy Will, or any one else of that age, where the heart was concerned. They, for all their inexperience, must be the ultimate judges; the wisdom of *instinct* and so on and so forth. The responsibility on an outsider is too great even for advice; and the advice of a mother to the son who adores her. . . There is such a thing as having too much power put into one's hands. I don't say I'm *right*; but, if Will married a girl whom I considered the most unsuitable person in the world. . . So long as *he* loved *her*, and *she* loved *him*. . . Have I been inconsistent there?

I have always said that for a boy of his tastes and upbringing *some* little money is essential as light and air. A truism! Have I been inconsistent here?

I don't want to blow my own trumpet, as they say; and I resent this modern practice of proclaiming to the whole world how much one loves one's own flesh and blood—as though it were something very new and wonderful; but *you* have never doubted that I would sell the clothes from off my back and the roof from over

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

my head if Will's happiness depended on it. You are good enough to talk about my "sacrifices", but am I being anything more than normal, natural and consistent, a mother brought up in a certain school of a certain period?

I think that, if the facts were ever known, you would find I had been loyal to my principles. They never will be—for obvious reasons. . . With you, of course, it is different; I have told you everything and laid my heart bare. Should I have done that, if there was anything to conceal? And if the last chapter would really interest you. . .

A *superficial* change undoubtedly there has been, corresponding to a profound change in all our conditions. A year or two ago. . . It is not too much to call it a revolution, so many unexpected things have happened. In those days one never dreamed that my brother-in-law would drag what I suppose I must call his "honour" through the Divorce Court; and, so long as poor Kathleen bore him one daughter after another, it seemed safe to presume that Cheniston and the title would come sooner or later to Arthur and, through him, to our boy. The problem of that period was to "carry on", as Will would say; my brother Brackenbury and his wife would not like to be called mean, but they were certainly *careful*, and it was only by eternal pinching and

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

scraping that we made both ends meet. Many young men in Will's position would have put themselves up to auction, as it were, and married the first rich woman who came their way. Goodness me, my boy had a big enough choice! First of all Hilda, and he resigned his claims there to my nephew Culroyd; then the South American widow, but he very quickly saw how unsuitable *that* would be; and you may say—without any unkindness—that my niece Phyllida was waiting all the time for him to drop the handkerchief and only consented to marry Hilary Butler when the other thing was out of the question. Unfortunately you can't please *everybody*, and Will was old-fashioned enough to desire a wife with whom he could be in love and to shut his ears to all the lures of money. . . . Money? A man of his ability can always *earn* money, and our only difficulty was to know where to start. He contemplated *la haute finance* for a while, but was repelled by the prospect of having to work with men like Sir Adolf Erckmann; then he explored the possibilities of Mr. Surdan's shipyards, but this for some reason was not to his taste. Now I truly honestly believe that he has found his *métier*. . . .

While he was still undecided about his career, I was reluctant to part with the house in Mount Street, though for many years it had really been

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

too expensive for us. One grows, indeed, to love one's own vine and fig-tree, and the place was *filled* with associations. Did I ever tell you that the princess was good enough to say that, in coming there, she always felt she was coming *home*? . . . With Will gone, the place is a white elephant; and I cannot flatter myself that any little *niche* I may occupy makes me indispensable to the life of London. When people talk about inconsistency, they fancy a change in *you*, but it doesn't occur to them that the world all *round* you may have changed. I had long contemplated *radical* alterations and was only perplexed to know where to begin.

Our thoughts had all been turned for the moment from our own affairs by the romance of my dear niece Phyllida's engagement to Colonel Butler. Alas! when we came back to London, it was to find what I then regarded as a sword *still* suspended over our heads, *still* hanging by a hair. Since the night when Sir Appleton Deepe dined with us to discuss the appointment for Will, this girl Molly Phenton had not been near the house. For a week before that she had been calling, waiting, writing—always protesting that my boy had given her a promise of marriage. As it was impossible for them to marry without money, I refused to believe that Will had

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

promised; not believing this story of a promise, I felt that she was trying to blackmail us; feeling *that*, I declined to see her. One thing followed automatically from another. It was not until she called that evening and Sir Appleton—*rather* officiously, if you'll promise not to tell any one I said so—insisted on interviewing her, that I learned the truth about her condition. *Then*, I am sure, we should all have agreed that Will must marry her at once, but Sir Appleton would give us no time. I suppose concentration on one object is very necessary in business, but it *does* limit a man's outlook: Sir Appleton could see but this one thing. "My good sir," I wanted to tell him, "shew us *how* it is to be done, and it *will* be done." But he would not discuss the appointment, though he had given me as solemn a promise as a man can give; he dashed home, after sending this girl on ahead, and we heard no more of them.

I felt that it was useless to talk to my boy just then, because he was so much worried that anything more might have brought on a complete break-down. My husband too. . . I respect Arthur's judgement at other times, but, where his own son is concerned, I find him curiously unsympathetic. I pretended to myself that I was trying to find a new opening for

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Will, now that Sir Appleton had played us so shamefully false, but I'm afraid that I was simply letting things drift. . .

Then my brother-in-law Spenworth paid me the rare honour of a visit. He had come up from Cheniston on purpose, though—to judge from his voice—you would have thought he was still trying to make himself heard from the fastnesses of Warwickshire. . .

“Well, my dear Ann,” he roared, “I've come to give you a piece of my mind.”

Do you know, had the retort not been so cheaply obvious, one would have been strongly tempted to ask whether he could really spare it. . . So characteristic of Spenworth! I am not a woman to bear malice, but I could not forget that *very* few days had passed since he played me a trick which to that type of mind, no doubt, seems funny, but which *might* have involved me in *embarrassment* and *humiliation*. It was one night when the princess was with me; Spenworth had been presiding over some regimental dinner and he thought it would be an amusing hoax to send all these young officers—with partners whom they had apparently picked up one really dares not contemplate *where*—on the pretext that I was giving a dance and would be delighted to see them. Dear Hilary Butler's presence of mind *alone* saved the

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

situation. I detest practical joking and, when my brother-in-law was announced, I confess that I expected less to be lectured than to receive some little expression of regret. . .

Hoped rather than *expected*. . . You are quite right.

“I must beg for enlightenment,” I said.

“Well, what’s that scamp of a boy of yours been up to?,” he asked.

“I will *not* permit such language about my son!,” I cried.

“Too late now. You should have brought him up better,” he said.

This from Spenworth, whose life has been one dark, unbroken record of debauchery, unfaithfulness . . . not a tenth part known owing to his cleverness in hushing up scandals, impoverishing that glorious estate to buy the silence of those who held awkward secrets. Indeed I know what I am talking about. When he wanted poor Kathleen to divorce him, he gave her the run of Cheniston; heirlooms apart, she might take anything “to feather her new nest”, as he elegantly put it. And this in a house which will come to Arthur and Will if anything happens to that sickly baby. . . There was a *marvellous* story going the rounds a few months ago that I had tried to entangle Kathleen with the King’s Proctor or the President of the

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Divorce Court or somebody of the kind, so that she might be tied to Spenworth and Cheniston have no heir. Comment. . . What is the phrase? Comment is superfluous! But, if Arthur or Will were steward of Cheniston, they would give a better account of their stewardship than my brother-in-law is likely to do. . . I have lost the thread. . . Ah, yes!

“Satan rebuking sin, Spenworth,” I suggested, “though I have no idea what charge you are bringing against my boy.”

“You can have a good time in this world without being a cad,” he said. “At least I hope *I* can. Apparently your precious Will can’t.”

“Have a good time”! *There* is a phrase to put you on your guard!

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said. “I don’t know what’s the matter with you. But I *do* know that we shan’t do any good by continuing this discussion.”

“Not so fast,” said Spenworth, as I walked to the bell. “*You* asked me to second that little beast at the club. I *did*. I went there the other day and was told that some fellow with a name like Apple-pie-bed had told Will that, if he ever dared shew his nose inside the door again, he’d be kicked into the street. Well, as it’s our misfortune to share a common

name, I took it on myself to have Mr. Apple-bed pointed out to me; I asked him if he didn't think that perhaps he was being a little high-handed. I don't allow *every* Chinese grocer to take liberties with me. He said: 'I'm sorry the feller should be a relation of yours, but for the sake of the club I must stick to what I threatened. You'd better report me to the committee when it's all over, and we shall then see whether, on a show-down, my action is approved.' That, my dear Ann, is all I know; but, in case you're not aware of it, any reflection on a man I've supported at a club is a reflection on me; if the young cub had been pilled, I should have had to resign; if he gets hoofed out, people will want to know why the hell I ever backed him. . . ."

As you know, I am always lost in admiration of Spenworth's *elegance* of diction. And all delivered as though he were cheering hounds on to a line. Everything in my poor little house *trembled*. . .

Truly honestly I had no idea that men in their clubs could be such great babies. . .

"Sir Appleton Deepe—*that* is his name, Spenworth; I am not sure whether you were trying to be facetious—," I said, "is evidently a queer-tempered man. I have had evidence of it before. Should you engage in conversation

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

with him again, you may tell him that he touches a hair of Will's head *at his peril*. I have nothing more to say except that *in your club you seem to be as violent and disorderly as out of it.*"

There was a certain amount more *noise . . . and bluster*. But I think that in time even Spenworth must have seen that he was hardly the appropriate person to champion such a cause . . . whatever cause he imagined he *was* championing. . . Hardly had he left when my nephew was announced—and came in with a great show of embarrassment. I am very fond of Culroyd; so far as any one, without taking the responsibility of active interference, can help to bring two young people together. . . Both Culroyd and Hilda persist in regarding me as their good fairy. . .

"My dear boy," I said, "what is the matter?"

"Oh, I'm—in the deuce of a hole, Aunt Ann," he answered. "Where's Will?"

"He has not come in yet," I said. "Tell me what has happened."

"Well," said Culroyd, "I think you know a man called Deepe, Appleton Deepe." My heart *sank!* "He called on me to-day—I don't know if the fellow's mad, but he said: 'You're a cousin of Mr. William Spenworth, aren't

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

you? Now, he's been doing one of the things that a gentleman *doesn't* do; and some one has to thrash him for it. I'll say that there's a girl mixed up in it, but I won't tell you any more. She has no brothers, and her father's too old to do justice to the occasion. The question is: who's to give him his thrashing? I'm not as vigorous as I could wish; but I'll undertake it, if I must. If, on the other hand, you'll do it for me and do it properly, we may save a scandal; I shouldn't like to injure his mother in any way, but he has to have his thrashing.' . . . Well, I didn't know whether the fellow was in his right mind. . . . I tried to get him to tell me something more. . . . Then I said I'd think it over. . . . What the devil's Will been up to now? "

"Now?," I repeated.

Really, I will stand a good deal from Culroyd, because he is my nephew and I am very fond of him. But I would not submit to being hectorred by my relations old and young, one after another. Goodness me, the next thing would be that I should have to give sureties to *Phyllida* and allow *Ruth* to make herself a ruler and a judge. . . .

"Well, what does it mean?," Culroyd persisted.

"You have suggested," I said, "that this

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

Sir Appleton Deepe was mad; I can only fear that his madness was contagious.”

I was *beside* myself with anger. . . And at the same time *highly* uneasy. Will had not been going to his club the last few days because of this girl's practice of camping on the doorstep there; and it was long past the time when he usually came home. Culroyd shrugged his shoulders and said good-bye. I waited—on and on. Seven o'clock, half-past seven, eight. I was just going up to dress when Norden rang through to say that some one wished to speak to me on the telephone.

Need I tell you that it was Sir Appleton Deepe? My dear, by that time I should have been amazed if it had been any one *else*; he seemed to dog my steps and pervade my life. As, he said, I was apparently expecting Will home to dinner, I should no doubt like to know that my boy was with him; they had met in the street, and he had *persuaded* him to come home. . .

You have met the man, of course. Well, I wonder whether you will agree with me here. Ordinarily, I should say, he had the furtive, apologetic manner of one who is not quite certain of himself; once roused, even by something that the detached outsider might think was *not* quite his business, he is a changed man.

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

I am thinking now of his *voice*; the telephone had changed its *timbre* into something quite terribly sinister. The way he said he had *persuaded* Will to come home with him! And then he went on to ask whether he could not *persuade* me, if I was not already engaged, to join them, as they were discussing certain things in which I really ought to have a say. . .

Of course I went just as soon as Norden could find me a taxi. Will has the courage of a lion, but I would not leave him at the mercy of that epileptic creature when I knew that for weeks he had been so much overwrought and worried that the least thing might bring on a break-down. . . Besides, if Sir Appleton had repented his haste in throwing away an opportunity of securing my boy's services in his business, a mother's guidance and judgement could never be more needed; I do not wholly trust these "captains of commerce"; if they did not know how to drive a very hard bargain, they would not be where they are. . .

I found them in Sir Appleton's study—doing nothing in particular, so far as I could make out, though Will was drinking whisky and soda, which shewed me that he must be greatly overwrought.

"It is good of you to come, Lady Ann,"

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

said Sir Appleton. "You have not had time to forget our last meeting. I was made aware then of several things: as that your son had taken advantage of a young girl's innocence and was leaving her to bear the consequences. . . As that you were opposed heart and soul to such a *mésalliance* as would result from his marrying her. . . As that you were unhappily not in a position to make adequate financial provision for her, but that you would pay her a hundred pounds 'in full discharge', as we say in business. . . I felt that, as there was no law to cope with such gentry as your son, some one must take the law into his own hands. Now, Miss Phenton had no relations of an age to protect her, and your nephew seemed reluctant to vindicate the family honour—I sympathize with him; his words were: 'If once one starts thrashing the little beast, I don't see where it's going to end,'—; I therefore decided that it was incumbent on me, as the one person whom Miss Phenton had consulted, to administer such a lesson that your son would remember it to the end of his days. Having the good fortune to meet him in the street this afternoon, I invited him to come home with me and—be whipped!"

My attention had wandered a little in preparing a speech for my Lord Culroyd the next

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

time he does me the honour to call; but I saw Sir Appleton jerk his head towards the table and, to my *horror*, I beheld an enormous crop made, I should think, of rhinoceros-hide.

“I regret to inform you that it may not be necessary,” said Sir Appleton. “When I told our young friend to prepare for execution, he asked naturally enough why he was being executed and quite convinced me that it would be absurd to carry out the sentence when his one burning desire and ambition was to marry Miss Phenton.”

Sheer, unabashed intimidation!

I looked at Will; but he was sitting with his head between his hands, utterly worn out with the worry of the past few weeks.

“Is this true?,” I asked.

“He will tell you,” said Sir Appleton, taking care to give him no chance of speaking for himself, “that he always intended to marry her; he now clearly remembers promising to marry her, which is so satisfactory. It was only a question of times and seasons and ways and means. I admit it is not a solution which I consider ideal, because I—like you, though from another standpoint—do not regard it as a wholly suitable match. A first love, however, is not an easy thing to overcome, and Miss Phenton

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

is unaffectedly devoted to your son despite the period of anxiety through which he unavoidably compelled her to pass; your son will tell you that he is no less devoted to her.”

If only the man would have stopped talking for one moment! He sat there, smiling to himself and pouring out this stream of pre-*tentious*, shop-walker's English. . . I'm sure you know what I mean! One so often finds with people who are not quite certain of themselves that they heap up affectations and dare not venture on a colloquialism for fear of seeming what they would call “ungenteel”. *Slang* I abhor, but there is such a thing as the daily speech of educated men and women. . .

“Tell me, dear Will,” I begged, “whether this is true.”

“I've always wanted to marry Molly,” he answered. And, though sheer fatigue had taken the tone from his voice, I heard a throb of conviction. “I didn't see, though, how we could marry until we had something to marry on. That's what I told her fool of a father . . . and her . . . and the guv'nor . . . and Sir Appleton. If you'd settle that between you instead of badgering me, I'll marry her to-morrow.”

His nerves were strained to breaking-point. . .

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

And I am not ashamed to confess that I felt hardly adequate to discussing the most momentous decision in my boy's life. After inviting me to dinner, Sir Appleton seemed to have forgotten all about it. Nine o'clock had struck; and I was faint and *sick* with hunger. I have reached an age when I like regular meals at regular hours. These business men must have iron constitutions; or else they must eat very hearty luncheons. And I kept saying to myself: "For *truly* unbusinesslike irregularity, go to your business man." . . .

One thing stood out clearly. As I have always refused to *lead* Will where his affections were concerned, so I could never stand in the way when once his heart had spoken.

"We must not worry him," I told Sir Appleton. "Cannot you and I talk over ways and means together? I have no idea what to suggest. As you know, my husband and I are paupers. . . ."

He, if any one, after all that he had taken upon himself, was the man to help us out of our difficulty.

"I have a scheme," he said, "but your son had better hear it, as he will be a party to it."

I could have gone on my knees to him for a crust of bread. . . . It could hardly have been

deliberate—this policy of starvation—, but I was *strongly* reminded of very similar treatment from a certain general in the War Office . . . who shall be nameless. You remember my difficulty about Will's commission; he was on *fire*, of course, to go into the infantry. "Do you," I asked him, "think you are serving your country by spending one day in the trenches and six months in hospital with rheumatic fever?" And, when I had *wasted* argument and entreaty on *him*, I carried my appeal to Cæsar. On the *staff* my boy would have been worth his weight in gold; anything else was simply a short cut to hospital. I told this general . . . when at *last* I contrived to see him; and his method of receiving me was to keep me standing—not a chair to be seen in the room!—with all the windows open, a gale blowing and no fire. I made him see reason at the end, but I was in bed for a week afterwards. . . I wondered whether Sir Appleton was trying to starve me into submission. . .

His plan. . . I wish you could have heard it in his own words! The impudence and brutality. . .

"If you've no money yourself, Lady Ann," he said, "you've rich relations. Lord Brackenbury, I am sure, would give a substantial sum

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

to start his nephew in life. And so would your brother-in-law, Lord Spenworth. I have spoken to both and demonstrated that your son will be at the other side of the world for probably a number of years with no opportunity of coming to them, as in the past, when he needed assistance. They both seemed disposed to help, but felt that the first step should be taken by you. I have ascertained that the lease of your house—”

“You would like,” I interrupted, “to sell the roof over my head! Why not the clothes off my back?”

“There is a great scarcity of houses,” he said, “and you would get a good price. Besides, with your son married and away you will not have the same need for a big house in London. . . . When the fund has been collected, it will be settled on Miss Phenton, as it is her position that requires safeguarding; you have assured me of your son’s abilities, so he should have no difficulty in making a big income in the position which I contemplate offering him. If he fails, it will be his own fault; but, as I never believe in bolstering up failures, his wife must be made independent of his success in business. If you consent to this in principle and will empower me to work out the details, your son’s appointment is secured, and he can

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

sail for China as soon as he can get a passage. Let us now go in to dinner, or Miss Phenton will be wondering what has happened to us."

I felt *then* that he had decided to break me at all costs, one shock after another. *Forcing* Will into marriage, *driving* him abroad, calmly proposing that I should denude myself of everything—and then throwing me face to face with this girl. I tried to protest. . . And then I knew that, if he did not give me something to eat, I should simply break down. . .

I had met the girl before, of course—just for a moment, hardly long enough to take in more than a general view, "the old clergyman's pretty little daughter", if you understand me. . . Big grey eyes and a quantity of soft hair; a shy, appealing girl. . .

"Won't you leave us alone for a moment?," I said to Sir Appleton. Rather to my surprise he *did* have the consideration to oblige me in that. "Molly, my dear, won't you kiss me?," I said.

The poor little thing shrank from me. . .

"I'm so *ashamed*," she cried.

"My child, my child," I said, "you are overwrought. But we are going to send you right away, where you will forget all your troubles. All will be well. All would have

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

been well from the beginning if you had trusted me and taken me into your confidence."

"I felt you'd think me so wicked!", sobbed the poor little thing.

I told her that I couldn't think *her* wicked without thinking the same of Will.

"Right and Wrong," I said, "existed from the beginning and will endure to the end, irrespective of conventions and institutions. I say to you what I should not dare say to your father: right and wrong are older than any marriage laws. You love my boy?"

"Oh, I do," she cried. "I never loved any one before and I could never love any one else."

"And he loves you," I said. "Need we say any more at present? I find it hard to spare him, but sooner or later this is a thing that comes to every mother. If I surrender him to you, will you in your turn take my place and devote yourself to him as I have tried to do? There is so little time and so many things to do that I cannot talk to you as I should like. Very soon you will be married, very soon you will both have slipped away to a very far country. Nothing that any of us can do for you both will be left undone; every penny that we can scrape together will be yours. As time goes on, you will learn how much money can do—and how

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

little. All my life I have been scraping and pinching, pinching and scraping to provide for the happiness and comfort of my husband and son. You will have to do the same. Very few of us have enough for all we should like, and you will find that between husband and wife, when one has to yield, it is the wife who yields. That is the law of the Medes and Persians. Too often it is 'A suit for him or a frock for me'. . . Promise me that you will never let my boy go short of anything. He has been brought up to a certain standard of comfort, and I know by experience that, if you try to reduce that, it will be you who will suffer in the long run. That is part of the price that we pay for being women. And now," I said, "let me kiss my daughter."

I do not wonder that my boy fell in love with her. *You* will, too, the moment you see her. As Arthur did. . . There is nothing much more to tell you about our dinner with Sir Appleton; when he *did* allow us to begin, I will say that he tried to make amends for any exhibition of what I had better call the business manner.

Of course, when I reached home, I found that I had only got rid of one trouble to make way for another. Arthur. . . He would have been even more furious if he had been less be-

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

wildered, but, as it is, I try to forget and I shall certainly not remind him of certain things that he said about my going to work behind his back, taking decisions over his head. When one has grown *attached* to a house. . . Is it not my frame and setting? Is not every corner filled, for me, with memories of the old days when the princess almost lived with us? There was an entirely *meaningless* explosion at the expense of poor Will, who very properly refused to be drawn into argument and went straight to bed.

“My dear Arthur,” I said, “sooner or later this was inevitable. When our boy married, we knew that we should have to go on providing for him. Is it so great a sacrifice that we should move into a smaller house, that you, perhaps, should have to work longer than you had intended? It is to establish our son in life.”

When the announcement was published, I invited just the family to a little informal dinner. They were *extravagant* in their praise of Molly—Spenworth in his hyperbolic manner going so far as to tell her that she was “chucking herself away”, as he elegantly put it, on some one who was not good enough for her. I should have thought it possible to pay a compliment without trying to be rude to as many other people as possible. . .

To do Spenworth justice, he behaved liberally

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Woman

over the money, though he must needs be facetious and tell Will that he would pay twice the sum to *keep* him out of England. Such humour is a little *primitive*. . . I acquit Brackenbury, too, of any illiberality, though Spensworth must needs call this a "thank-offering" . . . for some reason. . .

The marriage, of course, takes place immediately, as they sail the moment Sir Appleton can arrange about their passages. I am sure that it will be a success, though I prefer not to think about it; dearly as I love little Molly, she is robbing me of my boy. As soon as they leave England, I shall go right away for a time. What with one thing and another, the last year has been very exhausting, and Arthur and I have to prepare for a new life and a very different life. The old and the new are bridged by one's friends. . . Their love follows us into what must inevitably be *retirement* from the stage on which we have played our little part for our few years. . . We are abandoning any little *niche* that we may have occupied. . .

You I hope to see constantly. At the ceremony, of course, and afterwards here. . . The princess is coming. Whoever appeals to *her* graciousness and devotion will never appeal in vain. . .

THE END

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